Love With Curse

Book One

By Dua Khan (DK)

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⚠️ Trigger Warning: Dark Romantic High School Novel ⚠️

This novel contains intense and potentially distressing themes that may not be suitable for all readers. Please read with caution, especially if you are sensitive to the following topics:

- **Toxic and Obsessive Relationships -–** Themes of possessiveness, jealousy, and unhealthy romantic dynamics. Some characters may exhibit manipulative or controlling behavior.

- **Emotional and Psychological Manipulation** – Gaslighting, coercion, and power imbalances are explored in depth.

- **Dark Romance** – This story includes morally gray characters who make questionable decisions, blurred lines between love and obsession, and relationships that may not be considered healthy or conventional.

- **Violence and Physical Altercations** – Fights, aggressive confrontations, and moments of physical harm between characters.

- **Bullying and Social Isolation** – Depictions of bullying, exclusion, and emotional distress caused by peers.

- **Self-Destructive Behavior**– Impulsive decisions, risk-taking, and self-inflicted harm are referenced or depicted.

- **Family Issues and Trauma** – Dysfunctional family dynamics, neglect, and unresolved trauma play a role in character development.

- **Psychological Mind Games** – Characters may engage in manipulation, deceit, and mental warfare to gain control over situations and people.

- **Mature Themes** – Discussions and implications of intimacy, betrayal, and forbidden love are present.

This novel is intended for mature readers who can handle dark and emotionally complex themes. If any of these topics are triggering for you, please proceed with caution. Your mental well-being is important—take breaks when needed and prioritize self-care.

This isn't a love story—it's an obsession. Enter at your own risk.

Good girl now sits tight for Daddy...

Content

1. Lee Gyeong Hu
2. Lee Gyeong Hu
3. Lee Gyeong Hu
4. Lee Gyeong Hu
5. Lee Gyeong Hu
6. Lee Gyeong Hu
7. Kim Ji Yoo
8. Lee Gyeong Hu
9. Lee Gyeong Hu
10. Lee Gyeong Hu
11. Kim Ji Yoo
12. Kim Ji Yo
13. Lee Gyeong Hu
14. Lee Gyeong Hu
15. Lee Gyeong Hu
16. Lee Gyeong Hu
17. Lee Gyeong Hu/ Kim Ji Yoo
18. Kim Ji Yoo
19. Lee Gyeong Hu
20. Lee Gyeong Hu
21. Lee Gyeong Hu
22. Kim JI Yoo
23. Lee Gyeong Hu
24. Lee Gyeong Hu
25. Kim Ji Yoo
26. Lee Gyeong Hu
27. Lee Gyeong Hu

28. Lee Gyeong Hu
29. Lee Gyeong Hu
30. Lee Gyeong Hu
31. Kim Ji Yoo
32. Lee Gyeong Hu
33. Kim Ji Yoo
34. Lee Gyeong Hu
35. Lee Gyeong Hu
36. Kim Ji Yoo
37. Lee Gyeong Hu
38. Lee Gyeong Hu
39. Kim Ji Yoo
40. Lee Gyeong Hu
41. Lee Gyeong Hu
42. Lee Gyeong Hu
43. Lee Gyeong Hu
44. Kim Ji Yoo
45. Lee Gyeong Hu
46. Lee Gyeong Hu
47. Lee Gyeong Hu
48. Kim Ji Yoo
49. Lee Gyeong Hu
50. Kim Ji Yoo
51. Lee Gyeong Hu
52. Lee Gyeong Hu
53. Kim Ji Yoo
54. Lee Gyeong Hu/ Kim Ji Yoo
55. Lee Gyeong Hu
56. Lee Gyeong Hu

Playlist

"Main Rahun"____ Sumar Jafri
"Aşk Laftan Anlamaz"____ Background Music
"Cinderella Dead"____ Emeline
"Who"____ Jimin
"Levitating"____ Dua Lipa
"Moral Of The Story"____Ashe

Prologue

Velmora—a perfect city, a flawless paradise where dreams take flight. Everything about it breathes perfection, from its towering structures to its quiet, moonlit streets. But to me, perfection was never in the grand things. It was in the familiar hallways of Seonghwa Academy, the place I called my second home. For twenty-five years, this school stood tall, a witness to generations of students, their victories, their failures, their love, their heartbreaks. Little by little, it changed, evolving with time, yet in some ways, it remained the same. And for those who spent years within its walls, Seonghwa Academy was more than just a school—it was a part of them.

And so, there I was, sixteen-year-old Gyeong-hu, stepping through the school gates, my heart filled with little dreams and big hopes. At that time, my world was small—home to school, school to home, a cycle that never broke. My life revolved around responsibilities, love, aspirations, and studies. I was the kind of student who saw my name on the topper's list and felt a surge of pride that no other achievement could ever match.

Now, in the present, I stand in the spotlight, the world chanting my name. I have won countless awards for my voice, my talent, my presence on the grandest stages. People see me as an idol, a star, a legend. But even now, when I look back and see my name etched among the top students of Seonghwa Academy, it humbles me in a way fame never could. Because that was who I truly was—Gyeong-hu, Topper of 1998-1999. That title, that achievement, still feels like the most genuine thing about me.

But everything changed in 1999.

Grade ten was my last year as a topper. My last year of innocence. My last year of truth. Because 2000… 2000 was the year my story truly began.

Chapter 1: Lee Gyeong Hu

Stepping out of the car, I glanced at my mother. She smiled at me, her eyes filled with warmth.

“Study well,” she said softly.

I returned her smile. “Yes, Mother, I will.”

With that promise lingering in the air, I turned and stepped onto the school grounds. The morning wind carried the scent of fresh possibilities, a whisper of hope that something special would happen today. Seonghwa Academy always had that effect on me. Every day felt important, as if the universe was waiting to unveil a new chapter of my life.

Being a student of the 11th class, a sixteen-year-old girl filled with ambitions, I believed that every day held something extraordinary. I walked through the hallways, past the familiar faces of my classmates, some chatting, some rushing to their classes. But I had no time for distractions. My steps led me straight to my classroom, where I settled into my seat and pulled out my book.

The upcoming test weighed on my mind. The second period would determine the topper once again. With determination, I

began revising, flipping through the pages, absorbing every formula, every equation. The bell rang five minutes later, signaling the start of another school day.

Moments later, our mathematics teacher entered the room. As was the tradition, the entire class stood up in unison.

“Good morning, teacher,” we all greeted.

He nodded, acknowledging our politeness, and gestured for us to sit down. I immediately returned to my seat, my heart already racing with excitement.

“So, students,” the teacher began, scanning the classroom, “the tests I took from all of you have been checked.”

My fingers clenched slightly around my desk. My heart pounded, a familiar thrill surging through me. I knew what was coming. The announcement of the topper. And, as always, I was certain my name would be called.

The teacher held the stack of graded tests in his hands, flipping through them. “And the topper is…”

I stood up, my chin lifted with quiet pride, already anticipating the words that would follow.

But instead of my name, the teacher’s voice announced someone else’s.

“No, Gyeong-hu. Sadly, this time you didn’t top.”

A hard swallow stuck in my throat. My fingers froze mid-motion. A quiet chuckle rippled through the classroom, students exchanging glances, some whispering, others smirking.

My mind refused to accept it. I didn't top?

The boy's name echoed in the room like a cruel joke.

"Choi Min-jun is the new topper."

I turned sharply, my gaze landing on him. Choi Min-jun.

He sat there, completely calm, as if he had expected this. His dark eyes didn't waver as he took in the applause and teasing nudges from his friends. I clenched my jaw, narrowing my eyes at him. How did he take me down this time?

I remained standing even as the test papers were handed out. My fingers twitched when my sheet was placed before me. Slowly, I turned my gaze downward, scanning the numbers. 33.5 out of 35.

It was a high score, but not high enough.

I pressed my lips together, flipping through the pages, checking each answer. The numbers stared back at me. Something wasn't right. I pulled out my pencil, calculating the total once again. And then I saw it.

A mistake.

A small miscalculation in adding my marks. My score should have been higher.

Without hesitation, I stood up, test paper in hand, and walked straight to the teacher's desk.

"Teacher," I said, keeping my voice calm, "I think there's been a miscalculation in my marks."

He glanced up at me. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir. If you check again, you’ll see that the numbers don’t add up correctly.”

The teacher took my paper from my hands, adjusting his glasses as he began reviewing my answers. Silence fell upon the class as my classmates watched the exchange, some curious, others amused. I could feel their eyes on me, but I focused only on the numbers.

Seconds passed. Then, the teacher frowned slightly, taking out his pen.

“You’re right,” he admitted, correcting the total. “It looks like I made a mistake in adding the final score.”

A hush spread through the room as he rechecked the paper, his eyes flicking between the numbers. Then, he exhaled, setting the pen down.

“Gyeong-hu,” he said, his voice carrying through the silent room. “I apologize. You are, in fact, the topper once again.”

A wave of satisfaction rolled through me.

The classroom erupted into murmurs. Some students exchanged glances, some looked disappointed, while others merely sighed as if they had expected this outcome all along.

The teacher cleared his throat before announcing, “The correct topper for this test is Gyeong-hu.”

I turned my head slightly, catching Choi Min-jun’s gaze. He didn’t look shocked. He didn’t argue. He simply smirked, as if this was amusing to him.

I took my test paper back, walking toward my seat with a small, satisfied smile. I sat down, my fingers smoothing over the sheet.

Balance restored.

I had reclaimed my title. But for some reason, I couldn't shake off the feeling that this was only the beginning.

It wasn't just about 1.5 marks. It was about my hard work.

I had poured myself into this, sacrificed sleep, ignored distractions, and stayed up late to ensure I maintained my position at the top. It wasn't about numbers—it was about the effort, the dedication, the hours of studying when the world was asleep. It was about proving that my hard work meant something.

And then there was him.

A guy who didn't even care about his own life, let alone grades. A guy who belonged to the 12th grade—one year older, my senior. Someone who was completely different from me. Someone who lived as if rules didn't exist.

Kim Ji-yoo.

If there was one person in Seonghwa Academy who was my complete opposite, it was him. While I lived my life with discipline, bound by responsibilities, he lived his with reckless abandon, doing whatever he pleased, as if nothing in the world could touch him.

A guy totally different from me. Totally idiotic. Absolutely impractical.

Every single girl in school had a crush on him. Every. Single. One.

It didn't matter that he was known for skipping classes. It didn't matter that teachers constantly scolded him for his behavior. It didn't matter that he had a reputation for being a troublemaker. None of it mattered because he was Kim Ji-yoo—the guy who carried an aura of danger, someone who made breaking rules look like an art form.

His existence was a contradiction. While I worked to make my parents proud, he lived as if he had nothing to prove. While I believed in responsibility, he believed in chaos.

And what made it worse?

He was fearless.

There wasn't a single moment when I saw him hesitate, second-guess, or doubt himself. If he wanted to do something, he did it—whether it was skipping school, ignoring assignments, or performing dangerous stunts on his bike.

Yes. His bike.

If there was one thing Kim Ji-yoo was famous for—aside from his looks, his attitude, and his ability to make every girl in school swoon—it was his obsession with motorcycles.

He treated the school parking lot like his personal stunt ground. Every morning, every evening, and sometimes even during breaks, he could be seen revving up his sleek black bike, spinning it around in circles, leaving tire marks like signatures on the pavement.

I had seen him standing on his moving bike as if gravity didn't apply to him, letting go of the handlebars as if he had nothing to lose. I had seen him race down the roads at insane speeds, making the other students cheer and scream his name.

And every time, I thought the same thing.

He's going to get himself killed one day.

And yet, no matter how reckless he was, no matter how much trouble he got into, there was something about him that made people unable to look away.

Even the teachers, who constantly scolded him, couldn't hide the fact that he fascinated them. They hated how effortlessly he broke the rules, how he never seemed to care, how he managed to survive in a system that demanded discipline.

I didn't understand it.

How could someone like him exist? How could someone live so freely while the rest of us were weighed down by responsibilities?

I hated him.

Not because he was reckless. Not because he was dangerous.

But because he was the kind of person I could never be.

The class ended, and I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. The tension of the test results had finally faded, replaced by the usual routine of the day. Next was our English period, but the teacher had yet to arrive.

As the classroom buzzed with chatter, I flipped open my book, deciding to go through the upcoming lesson. But before I could focus, a familiar presence approached my desk.

Choi Min-jun.

The same guy who had nearly given me a heart attack when the teacher announced him as the topper. If not for that grading mistake, he really would have beaten me. I still wasn't over that moment—the way my heart had dropped, the way the whole class had chuckled.

Thankfully, fate had corrected itself. I was still the topper.

"Lee Gyeong-hu," he said, standing beside my desk.

I looked up, my pen pausing mid-air. His expression was neutral, but there was a hint of something in his eyes—curiosity, maybe? Annoyance? I couldn't tell.

"Can I take your science notebook? I need to complete the work I missed," he asked.

I blinked, momentarily surprised.

Choi Min-jun wasn't exactly known for borrowing things from others. He was always self-sufficient, one of those students who barely needed help. So, him asking me for my notes? Strange.

But I wasn't the type to say no to a classmate in need.

I smiled and handed him my notebook. "Here."

He took it without another word and walked back to his seat.

And with that, the day passed in a blur.

By the time I got home, exhaustion was beginning to settle into my bones. School was draining—not just because of the classes, but because of the constant pressure I placed on myself to be perfect.

I pushed open the front door and stepped inside, greeted by the familiar silence of the house. My mother was busy as usual, just as I expected. She was always busy. Meetings, calls, business trips—her life revolved around work.

But despite everything, I missed my father.

Oh no, don't get me wrong. He wasn't dead. If that were the case, maybe missing him would have made more sense.

But he wasn't here. He wasn't part of this house anymore.

After the divorce, he moved abroad with his new wife, leaving me with my mother. And yet, despite the distance, despite the new life he had built, he still loved me. That much, I knew.

He called whenever he could, sent gifts, and always reminded me that I was still his daughter no matter what. But phone calls and presents weren't the same as having him here.

And my mother… she loved me, too. I could feel it, even if she rarely said it outright.

She just had a different way of showing it.

For her, love meant pushing me to be the best. Love meant strictness, high expectations, and discipline. It meant checking my grades instead of asking how my day was. It meant

reminding me of my responsibilities rather than comforting me when I was tired.

I stepped into the dining room, where she was sitting at the table, laptop open, phone pressed against her ear as she spoke in her usual professional tone.

When she noticed me, she quickly ended the call. “You’re home.”

I nodded, setting my bag down. “Yes, Mother.”

She glanced at the clock. “You’re late. Did you waste time after school?”

“No,” I answered immediately. “I came straight home.”

She sighed, closing her laptop. “Good. You should know by now that time is precious. I don’t want you wasting it on unnecessary things.”

I swallowed back the urge to tell her that I didn’t waste time. I never did.

Instead, I simply nodded. “I understand.”

Her eyes softened just a little, but the strictness never fully left them. “How was your test?”

I straightened my posture. “I topped, as always.”

A flicker of approval crossed her face, but she didn’t smile. My mother was not the type to express emotions easily. Instead, she nodded. “Good. I expected nothing less from you.”

That was it. No ‘I’m proud of you,’ no ‘You worked hard.’ Just a confirmation that I had met her expectations.

But I wasn’t disappointed. I had long accepted that this was how she was.

My mother wasn’t heartless. She wasn’t cold. She just had a different way of showing her love. And as her daughter, I had learned to understand it.

“I’ll go study now,” I said, picking up my bag again.

“Wait.” She stood up, smoothing out her blazer. “Did you eat?”

I hesitated. “Not yet.”

“Go eat first. Then study.”

That was her way of saying she cared.

I smiled softly. “Yes, Mother.”

Because no matter what, I was her obedient daughter.

After finishing dinner, I carried my bag upstairs to my room. The moment I stepped inside, I let out a long breath, feeling the weight of the day settle onto my shoulders.

There was no time to relax. Not yet.

I had responsibilities.

I walked straight to my desk, pulling out my English textbook and notebook. English wasn’t exactly my weakest subject, but it wasn’t my strongest either. Unlike mathematics, where logic ruled and formulas never betrayed you, English was subjective.

It required interpretation, creativity, and an understanding that sometimes, answers weren't as clear-cut as numbers on a page.

I flipped open my notebook to today's lesson. We had been studying classic literature, analyzing themes, and understanding the deeper meanings behind words. I reread my notes carefully, underlining key points and making sure everything was clear in my mind.

But as I stared at the page, my thoughts began to wander.

I wondered if my father ever read the books I studied.

I wondered if my mother had ever taken the time to appreciate literature, or if she saw books as just another way to gain knowledge and nothing more.

I shook my head, pushing those thoughts away. Focus, Gyeong-hu.

I picked up my pen and began summarizing the lesson in my own words. Writing things down always helped me retain information better. The minutes turned into an hour, and soon, I had gone through my English homework, revised the new vocabulary words, and re-read the assigned chapters from the novel we were studying.

By the time I closed my notebook, my eyes felt heavy. But my study session wasn't over yet.

English was just one subject. I still had other things to review—science, history, and of course, mathematics.

I took a deep breath, stretching my arms before moving on to the next subject. This was my routine, my everyday life. School, home, study, repeat.

While some students spent their evenings texting their friends or watching TV, I spent mine surrounded by books, chasing perfection. It wasn't easy. But this was what I had chosen.

Or maybe… this was what had been chosen for me.

The rest of the night passed in the same way.

After finishing my studies, I packed my bag for tomorrow, double-checking that everything was in place. Then, I took a quick shower, letting the warm water wash away the exhaustion clinging to my body.

By the time I slipped into bed, it was past midnight. The house was silent, my mother already asleep in her room.

I stared up at the ceiling, feeling the familiar emptiness creep in.

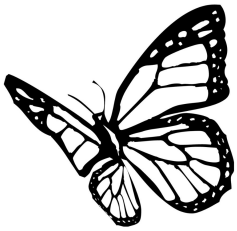
Tomorrow would be the same as today. And the day after that would be the same, too.

But what if… what if one day, something changed?

I closed my eyes, pushing the thought away. It was a useless thing to think about.

Because my life wasn't meant to be exciting. It was meant to be perfect.

Chapter 2: Lee Gyeong Hu



The next morning, I walked through the school hallway, my mind still occupied with thoughts of the upcoming test. Students moved around me, chatting, laughing, hurrying to their classes, but I paid no attention. My focus was on the words I had memorized last night, the formulas I needed to recall.

And then—

Crash.

A sudden force slammed into me, knocking the air from my lungs. Before I could react, I was falling—no, we were falling.

The impact was sharp, cold against my back as I hit the floor. My glasses slipped off, landing somewhere nearby. And above me—him.

Kim Ji-yoo.

His weight pressed against me, his body towering over mine as he braced himself on his hands. My breath hitched. His face—so close—was only an inch away from mine.

Even with my blurry vision, I could see him. The sharp angles of his jaw, the slight smirk that always lingered on his lips, the deep gray eyes that locked onto mine, holding them there.

Kim Ji-yoo, the untouchable. The school's troublemaker. The guy every girl fell for.

And right now, he was on top of me.

His uniform, though technically the same as everyone else's, looked different on him. His tie was loosened, the first few buttons of his white shirt undone, exposing the hint of his collarbone. His blazer hung off his shoulders like he didn't care whether he wore it or not. His whole appearance screamed effortlessly reckless—the kind of boy mothers warned their daughters about.

I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

But before I could say anything, he moved.

He stood up, brushing off his uniform as if nothing had happened. Then, he looked down at me, expression unreadable. For a moment, I thought he would say something—apologize, maybe.

But he didn't.

Instead, he held out his hand.

I swallowed, staring at it before finally taking it. His grip was firm, strong, and when he pulled me to my feet, I stumbled slightly, my balance unsteady.

Without a word, he bent down, picked up my glasses, and handed them back to me.

No apology. No explanation.

And then, just like that, he was gone—chasing after some guy, his long strides taking him down the hallway as if our collision had meant nothing to him.

But for me?

The scene replayed in my mind.

Even as I walked to class, even as I took my seat, even as I pulled out my books, I couldn't shake it. His face. His eyes. The way he had looked at me in that brief moment before standing up.

I exhaled, shaking my head. Focus, Gyeong-hu.

Kim Ji-yoo was nothing but trouble.

And besides…

I don't believe in love.

The moment I stepped into class, I pushed the morning's incident to the back of my mind. I had responsibilities to focus on.

Being the class president wasn't just about having a title. It came with duties—lots of them. From organizing class activities to making sure everyone followed the rules, my role required constant attention. And on top of that, I was also a part of the school council, which meant my responsibilities didn't end with just my class.

The first few periods passed as usual. Mathematics, Science, and Literature.

I took notes, answered questions, and made sure the class remained disciplined whenever the teacher stepped out. It was an unspoken rule that the class president had to keep everything under control.

During the short break, a group of students gathered around my desk.

“Gyeong-hu, can you help me with this math question?” one of my classmates asked, holding out her notebook.

I nodded, quickly explaining the steps. Before I could finish, another student approached.

“Class president, the English teacher asked if we could submit our essays by today instead of tomorrow.”

I sighed but nodded. “Alright, I’ll make sure everyone turns them in by lunchtime.”

Just as I finished speaking, one of the council members popped into the classroom.

“Lee Gyeong-hu, we have a meeting after lunch. The principal wants an update on the upcoming school event.”

I gave a small nod. “I’ll be there.”

This was my daily routine.

Balancing my studies, handling class affairs, and fulfilling my student council duties.

Sometimes, I wondered if people ever noticed how much effort I put into everything. If my mother noticed. But there was no time to dwell on that. Perfection required discipline, not distractions.

And so, I continued through my day, shoving every unnecessary thought—including Kim Ji-yoo—out of my mind.

Meanwhile Lunch was supposed to be a time to relax, but for me, it was just another part of the routine. I sat at my usual spot in the cafeteria, eating quietly while flipping through my notes.

That was when Choi Min-jun walked up to me.

“Hey, um… did you read that?” he asked, his voice hesitant.

I looked up at him, confused. “Read what?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, shifting awkwardly. “The letter… I put in your science notebook yesterday.”

I froze. My chopsticks halted mid-air. “Min-jun, what are you talking about?”

His expression changed, like he had expected me to react differently. As if I should have known exactly what he meant. But I didn’t.

Instead of explaining further, he sighed and shook his head. “Forget it.”

And just like that, he turned and walked away, leaving me confused.

A letter? In my science notebook?

I tried to recall if I had seen anything unusual yesterday, but I had been so focused on my studies that I hadn't paid attention to anything extra. Did I accidentally leave the note behind in class? Or was it still in my bag somewhere?

I had no idea.

What I also didn't know was that, at that very moment, a storm was already brewing at home.

While I sat in school, unaware of the chaos about to unfold, my mother was in my bedroom.

She wasn't there for me.

She rarely entered my room unless necessary, but today, she had come to inspect the cleaning.

The maid had cleaned my room yesterday, but apparently, she had missed a spot. That was unacceptable to my mother, whose idea of perfection extended to every corner of our house.

As she scanned my room for any imperfections, her sharp eyes landed on something out of place.

A folded piece of paper.

It was lying just under my study table, tucked away, as if someone had dropped it there by accident.

Curious—and suspicious—she bent down and picked it up.

Her eyes narrowed as she unfolded the letter.

And then she saw it.

The handwriting wasn't mine. It was a boy's.

The words written on the page made her grip the letter tighter, her expression darkening.

"Lee Gyeong-hu... I don't know how to say this to you, but I have been wanting to for a long time. You are not just the smartest girl in school—you are different. You don't act like the others, and maybe that's why I always notice you. The way you focus, the way you push yourself so hard, it makes me want to know more about you. I know you probably won't take this seriously, but... I like you. I have for a while now. Even if you don't feel the same way, I just wanted you to know."

It was signed at the bottom.

Choi Min-jun.

Silence filled my room as my mother's hands clenched around the letter.

Her daughter—the girl she had raised with strict discipline, the girl who was supposed to focus only on studies—had received a love letter.

Unacceptable.

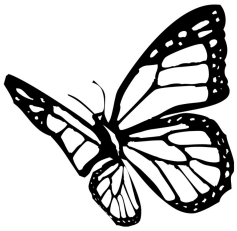
At that moment, she made a decision.

She would deal with this.

And I?

I was still sitting in school, completely unaware of what was waiting for me at home.

Chapter 3: Lee Gyeong Hu



I was still in school, unaware of what was happening at home. Unaware of the letter. Unaware of my mother's anger.

But soon, I would know.

At Home – My Mother's Wrath

My mother wasn't the type to ignore things. She was a woman of power and precision, someone who didn't tolerate distractions—especially when it came to me and my studies.

The moment she finished reading the letter, her decision was made.

Without a second thought, she grabbed her car keys, clutched the letter in her hand, and stormed out of the house.

She was heading straight to school.

Straight to the principal's office.

At School – My Ordinary Afternoon Turns into Chaos

I was sitting in class, writing notes for the next period when the door suddenly swung open.

A sharp voice rang through the room.

"Lee Gyeong-hu."

I froze.

That voice—it was unmistakable. My mother.

Every student turned toward the door, whispering. Some were shocked. Some looked excited, as if drama was about to unfold.

I slowly stood up, heart pounding.

She was standing there, her expression unreadable, but her posture said everything—something was very wrong.

Behind her, our class teacher and the principal stood with serious expressions.

"Gyeong-hu, come with me," the principal said.

I swallowed, nodding as I followed them out of the classroom. The whispers grew louder behind me, but I ignored them.

I had no idea what was happening.

Until we reached the principal’s office.

And then I saw him.

Choi Min-jun.

He was already standing there, confusion written all over his face. He looked at me, his mouth opening slightly as if to ask what was going on, but before he could say a word—

My mother slammed the letter onto the principal's desk.

"Is this what my daughter is receiving in school?" she demanded.

My eyes widened as I looked at the paper. I recognized the handwriting instantly.

Choi Min-jun's letter.

Realization hit me like a wave.

I hadn't even read it yet, but my mother had.

The principal picked up the letter, reading it carefully before sighing. "Mrs. Lee, I understand your concern, but—"

My mother didn't let him finish.

"My daughter comes to this school for one reason—to study. Not to be involved in childish nonsense like this." Her voice was sharp, filled with authority. "I will not tolerate this kind of distraction in her life."

I felt my hands go cold.

Choi Min-jun stood stiffly beside me, his face slowly losing color.

"Ma'am, I—I didn't mean to cause any trouble," he finally spoke, his voice low but steady. "It was just a letter. I wasn't expecting anything—I just wanted to tell her how I feel."

My mother’s glare hardened.

"And do you think that is appropriate?" she shot back. "Passing love letters in school? Taking my daughter’s focus away from her studies?"

"Mrs. Lee," the principal interrupted, trying to keep the situation calm, "I understand your concerns, but Min-jun is a good student. This letter, while inappropriate in your eyes, isn’t something we can punish him for."

I stood there, unable to speak, unable to breathe.

Everything was happening so fast.

I wanted to say something—to tell my mother that this wasn’t a big deal, that I hadn’t even read the letter yet—but the weight of her presence kept me silent.

Choi Min-jun looked at me then.

For the first time since all of this started, his expression changed.

He looked... disappointed.

Not in himself.

In me.

As if he had expected me to defend him.

But I didn’t.

I couldn’t.

"You should be ashamed," my mother said, her voice ice-cold. "If you have time to write love letters, you should be using that time to improve your studies instead."

Choi Min-jun clenched his jaw but didn't say anything.

The principal sighed again and finally said, "I will speak to Min-jun about this privately. Mrs. Lee, I assure you that our school discourages these kinds of distractions. Gyeong-hu is an excellent student, and we respect her dedication."

My mother exhaled, as if she had won.

She turned to me.

"Let's go," she said. "I'm taking you home early today."

My chest felt tight.

I didn't want to leave like this. I didn't want to leave Min-jun standing there, humiliated.

But I had no choice.

So I followed my mother out of the office.

And as I left, I didn't dare look back.

Because I knew—if I did—I would see the hurt in Min-jun's eyes.

The ride home was silent.

Not because my mother had calmed down—no, the silence was just the beginning of what was about to come.

The moment we stepped into the house, she exploded.

She threw her purse on the table and turned to face me, her eyes filled with disappointment and frustration.

"Do you have any idea how humiliating this was for me, Gyeong-hu?" she started, her voice sharp like a blade. "I had to leave my work, rush to your school, and sit in the principal's office because of a love letter? A love letter?"

I stood there, my hands clenched at my sides, staring at the floor.

"Is this what you've been doing behind my back?" she continued. "Instead of focusing on your studies, you're entertaining boys? I thought I raised you better than this!"

Her words didn't shock me.

I had been hearing things like this for as long as I could remember.

Getting scolded by her wasn't new—it was almost like a part of my daily routine. Like it was my right.

"You're in 11th grade, Gyeong-hu!" she pressed on. "You have one job—to study! Not to waste time on nonsense! Do you think getting love letters will make you successful? Do you think boys will help you get into a top university?"

I swallowed hard but didn't respond.

Because it wouldn't matter if I did.

She wasn't looking for an answer. She was just releasing her anger.

"You have always been an obedient daughter, Gyeong-hu. Don't disappoint me now," she said, shaking her head. "I will not let you ruin your future over something so stupid."

Her words hurt.

Not because I felt guilty—because I didn't.

But because she saw everything as a distraction. As a waste of time.

Even though I hadn't done anything wrong, even though I hadn't even read the letter, I was still guilty in her eyes.

Finally, when she was too exhausted to continue, she sighed heavily and walked away.

"Go to your room," she said, her voice tired. "I don't want to see you for the rest of the night."

I obeyed.

Not because I was scared.

But because I was too tired to fight.

The moment I shut my bedroom door, I grabbed my cordless phone on the side table of my bed .

There was only one person I could talk to.

My father.

I dialed his number, and after a few rings, he picked up.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said, his voice warm as always. "What's up?"

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Because suddenly, I felt this huge lump in my throat.

I wanted to be strong. I wanted to pretend I was fine.

But my father knew me too well.

His voice softened. "Gyeong-hu? What's wrong?"

I took a deep breath.

And then, I told him everything.

Every. Single. Thing.

From Choi Min-jun's letter to my mother's reaction, to the way she dragged me to school and humiliated me in front of the principal. How she made me feel like I had done something horribly wrong when all I did was exist.

I expected him to be shocked.

But he wasn't.

Instead, he sighed. And when he spoke, his voice was filled with sadness, not for himself, but for me.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, sweetheart," he said softly. "I really am."

I bit my lip. "Why does she always do this?" I whispered.

There was a pause.

"Because she thinks she's protecting you," he finally said. "She thinks love and feelings will distract you from success. She doesn't realize that you're a person, not a machine."

His words hit me so hard I felt my chest tighten.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I just… I just want her to understand. I work so hard. I try my best. But it's never enough for her."

"It's more than enough, Gyeong-hu," he said firmly. "Don't ever think it's not."

For a moment, I just sat there, listening to his voice, letting the warmth of his words heal the cracks inside me.

"You're not wrong for wanting to be yourself," he continued. "And you're definitely not wrong for receiving a letter. You didn't even ask for it."

I smiled a little, even though tears pricked my eyes. "She acted like I was the one who wrote it."

He chuckled. "That sounds like her."

I sighed. "I wish you were here."

"I do too, sweetheart," he said gently. "But listen to me—no matter what happens, I'm always on your side. Okay?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "Okay."

And for the first time that day, I felt a little less alone.

After the line ends, after I share my father my feelings.

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling completely drained.

My books were scattered on my study table, waiting for me. My assignments, my notes, my test preparations—everything was there, reminding me that I had work to do.

But I couldn’t bring myself to care.

Not today.

Not after everything.

I turned my head to the side, watching the faint glow of my bedside lamp. The silence in my room was deafening. Usually, I would have dived into my studies, buried myself in books like I always did. Because that was the only thing I was allowed to do.

But tonight, something inside me felt different.

A question, one I had buried deep inside me for years, rose to the surface.

What if I could be free?

What if I could do what I wanted?

What if, just once, I could forget about responsibilities and rules? What if I could live like a normal teenager? Laugh loudly in the hallways, run late to class without fearing the consequences, bunk a lesson just for the thrill of it?

I sighed, turning onto my side.

"I’m tired," I whispered to myself, my voice barely above a breath.

Tired of always being perfect. Tired of carrying expectations that felt heavier than me. Tired of living in a world where my dreams didn't matter.

A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it down. Crying wouldn't change anything.

So, I did the only thing I knew would bring me comfort.

I sang.

Softly, at first, like a secret I was afraid the walls would overhear.

Then, little by little, my voice grew stronger, the melody filling my empty room.

Singing was the only thing that made me feel alive. The only thing that truly belonged to me.

But even that wasn't mine—not really.

Because my mother would never let me show the world what I could do.

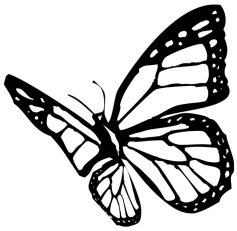
I had always been a great singer. I had always known it. But to her, my voice was just another distraction from my studies.

A waste of time.

I closed my eyes, letting the last note fade into silence.

And then, the day ended.

Chapter 4: Lee Gyeong Hu



The morning light streamed through the windows as I walked into the dining room. The familiar scent of freshly made Korean food filled the air—steaming white rice, stir-fried vegetables, kimchi, and a warm bowl of soybean paste soup.

Everything seemed normal.

But it wasn't.

Because my mother was sitting at the head chair, silent, her posture straight, her gaze sharp.

I hesitated for a second before walking to my usual seat—to her right.

As I picked up my chopsticks, I could feel it.

The tension.

It was heavier than the air in the room. More suffocating than the scolding from last night.

And that's when I knew—this silence was more dangerous than her words.

She wasn't done.

If she had wanted to, she could have sent me straight to homeschooling today. She had the power to take away my school, my friends, my little world—everything.

I swallowed, forcing myself to take a bite of rice.

No. I couldn't let that happen.

I had to do something before she made a decision.

Slowly, carefully, I reached across the table and placed my hand on hers.

"Mother… are you angry?" I asked, my voice soft.

She finally glanced at me, but her expression remained unreadable.

"Hmm," she hummed, neither confirming nor denying it.

My heart pounded.

I needed to choose my next words carefully.

I tightened my grip on her hand. "Mother, I swear to God, I didn't read the letter," I said, my voice steady but desperate enough to sound convincing.

She raised an eyebrow slightly, waiting.

I took a deep breath and continued.

"And mother, you know me. I'm an obedient child. I've never done anything reckless. Love is a waste of time, and I have no

interest in it. I only care about my studies. You raised me to be responsible, and I promise you—I will do my best."

I could see her expression falter for the first time.

She studied me for a long moment, her sharp gaze searching for any trace of a lie.

But I wasn't lying.

I had no plans of falling in love. I had no interest in distractions.

Not now. Not ever.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, her shoulders relaxed slightly.

She sighed. And just like that, the storm passed.

I watched as her expression softened.

"Sometimes, I worry about you too much," she admitted, shaking her head.

She reached out, and before I knew it, her arms were around me.

I froze.

It had been so long since she hugged me like this.

This was the mother I knew—the one who, despite her strictness, loved me in her own complicated way. I felt a little lighter. After that mothers driver dropped me off at school.

Whispers.

They were everywhere.

From the moment I stepped into the school gates, I could feel their weight pressing down on me, wrapping around me like invisible chains.

"Did you hear what happened yesterday?"

"Her mother came to school…"

"She made a whole scene in front of everyone."

"I heard she scolded Choi Min-jun so bad that he left looking like a ghost."

I exhaled sharply, gripping the strap of my school bag tighter. Fuck.

I hated it.

I hated the way people always found entertainment in someone else's misery.

I kept my head down, pretending not to hear the hushed voices that followed me like shadows.

And then there was Choi Min-jun.

I caught sight of him sitting at the far end of the classroom, his shoulders slightly slumped, his eyes avoiding mine. Distant.

He was always friendly, always smiling whenever he spoke to me. But now…

Nothing.

He didn't even glance at me.

I guess it was expected. After what happened yesterday, after my mother's humiliating visit…

I should feel bad.

But I didn't.

I was used to this.

Used to being alone.

Used to people coming and going from my life without ever staying.

So, I did what I always did. I focused on my work, flipping through my notebook, trying to ignore everything around me.

Until someone called my name.

"Gyeong-hu!"

I looked up.

A student was standing by the door, looking directly at me.

"Miss Sheena is calling you," they said.

Miss Sheena?

I furrowed my brows, wondering what she wanted. I stood up, brushing imaginary dust off my uniform before making my way towards the staff room.

But as I walked through the hallway, my footsteps came to a halt.

Because I saw him.

Kim Ji-yoo.

And like always, he was fighting.

A crowd had gathered around him, cheering his name.

"Ji-yoo! Ji-yoo! Ji-yoo!"

Their voices echoed through the corridor, excited, entertained, as if this was some kind of show for them.

And there he was, standing over another student, his fist raised, his jaw clenched.

The guy beneath him looked terrified, his uniform wrinkled from Ji-yoo’s grip on his collar.

I didn’t know what the fight was about.

I didn’t care.

But I was a member of the school council.

And I had a duty.

I took a step forward.

"Ji-yoo!"

My voice rang loud, cutting through the chaos.

He froze.

His deep gray eyes flickered to mine, and for a split second, I saw something in them.

Recognition. Annoyance. Amusement.

But I didn’t waver.

I shook my head. A silent order.

Don’t do it.

Ji-yoo held his position for a moment, as if debating whether to listen to me or not.

Then, with an irritated sigh, he let go of the guy’s collar, shoving him backward.

The student scrambled to his feet and ran.

The crowd groaned in disappointment, their fun interrupted.

Ji-yoo, on the other hand, just turned his head back to me, his expression unreadable.

I took a breath.

"Ji-yoo, sorry, but you have to come with me to the principal’s office."

He huffed. Rolled his eyes.

And then, in the most chillingly casual voice, he said—

"Lead the way." I led the way, my footsteps echoing through the quiet hallway as Ji-yoo followed behind me, completely unbothered.

When we reached the principal’s office, I took a breath before knocking on the door.

Knock. Knock.

“May I come in, sir?” I asked, my voice steady.

Principal Kang’s firm voice responded from inside.

“Yes, come in.”

I pushed the door open, stepping aside to let Ji-yoo enter first. He walked in, hands shoved into his pockets, completely at ease—as if he wasn’t about to get scolded.

The principal, an older man with sharp eyes and neatly combed hair, looked up from his desk. His gaze landed on Ji-yoo, and immediately, his expression darkened.

“Kim Ji-yoo,” he said in a low, disappointed tone.

Ji-yoo flopped down onto the chair in front of him, slouching back as if he was at home. He didn’t even greet him properly.

I, on the other hand, bowed slightly before speaking.

“Sir, I caught Ji-yoo fighting in the hallway again. He was about to punch a student when I stopped him.”

Principal Kang sighed deeply, rubbing his temples. “Again? This is the fifth time this month, Kim Ji-yoo. Do you ever get tired of causing trouble?”

Ji-yoo smirked lazily, tilting his head. “Not really.”

I closed my eyes for a second, inhaling sharply. He’s making it worse.

The principal’s jaw tightened. “You think this is funny?”

Ji-yoo just shrugged. “I mean, you act like I killed someone.”

Oh my god.

The tension in the room was unbearable.

I could see the principal's patience slipping away like sand through his fingers.

"That's it." Principal Kang slammed his hand on the desk. "Since you clearly don't care about rules, I have no choice but to—"

Before he could finish, I subtly leaned closer to Ji-yoo and whispered, "Just apologize."

Ji-yoo turned his head slightly, looking at me with raised eyebrows. His expression said, "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

He sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes. Then, in the most bored voice ever, he muttered, "Sorry."

It wasn't sincere at all, but at least it was something.

Principal Kang narrowed his eyes. "That didn't sound like you meant it."

Ji-yoo clicked his tongue. "Fine." He straightened up slightly and looked the principal dead in the eyes. "I apologize for fighting. Won't happen again."

Even though I knew that was a lie, it was convincing enough.

Principal Kang exhaled loudly, leaning back in his chair. He was clearly still pissed, but at least Ji-yoo wasn't getting suspended.

I decided to step in before things got worse.

“Sir, I know Ji-yoo has a history of fights, but maybe suspending him isn’t the best solution. Perhaps… a warning? Or extra school duties?”

The principal tapped his fingers against the desk, deep in thought. After a few seconds, he finally spoke.

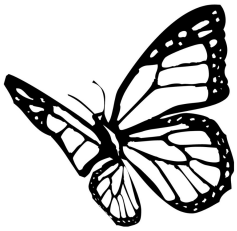
“Fine. One last chance.” His gaze hardened as he looked at Ji-yoo. “But if I catch you fighting again, you’re out. Do you understand?”

Ji-yoo gave a careless nod. “Yeah, yeah. Understood.”

I let out a quiet breath of relief.

Crisis avoided.

Chapter 5: Lee Gyeong Hu



As we stepped out of the principal's office, I glanced at Ji-yoo. His posture was relaxed, his hands tucked in his pockets, walking as if nothing had happened.

I hesitated for a second before calling out, "Ji-yoo."

He stopped mid-step, turning his head slightly to look at me. His deep gray eyes were unreadable, holding that same careless expression.

"I think you should control your anger, Ji-yoo," I said cautiously.

His gaze darkened instantly. "Shut up." His voice was sharp, cutting through the air.

I swallowed but didn't flinch. I had expected that response.

Still, I didn't want to leave things like this. "Look, Ji-yoo, everyone has problems in life," I continued, my voice softer. "I hear a lot about myself too. But I control my anger." I paused before adding, "Umm… sorry for interfering."

For the first time, Ji-yoo didn't immediately snap back. Instead, he just stared at me, his expression unreadable.

Then, without a word, he turned and walked toward the school entrance.

I assumed our conversation was over, so I sighed and prepared to head back to class. But before I could take a step, Ji-yoo suddenly stopped and glanced back at me.

“Would you keep standing there?” he asked.

I blinked, confused. “What?”

“Come with me,” he said simply.

I hesitated, my brain instantly reminding me of all the rules—this wasn’t right. I was the class president, a council member, the so-called ‘teacher’s pet.’

But my feet moved on their own.

I followed Ji-yoo as he led me out of the school building. We walked past the hallways, past the noisy students, until we reached an old tree near the edge of the school grounds.

He sat down on a wooden bench under the shade, stretching his legs out comfortably.

I stood there for a moment, watching him. How could someone be so carefree?

Ji-yoo caught me staring.

His lips curled into a smirk. “What’s the matter, princess?”

I froze.

Did he just call me princess?

For a brief second, I was taken aback, but I quickly masked my surprise.

“No, I’m just… surprised to see you so free,” I said, forcing a small smile.

Ji-yoo raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

I hesitated, then spoke honestly. “You don’t seem to have any worries in life. No rules, no pressure. Must be nice.”

Ji-yoo chuckled lowly, a deep, amused sound. Then, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and placed it between his lips.

I stiffened.

With a flick of his lighter, the tip burned red. He took a slow drag, inhaling deeply before blowing out a thin stream of smoke.

His gray eyes found mine again.

“Why?” he exhaled the smoke smoothly. “Princess, you getting tired of being a teacher’s pet?”

I clenched my jaw slightly at the teasing tone in his voice.

“I’m just saying,” I muttered.

Ji-yoo leaned back, looking at me with amusement. “Rules make life boring.”

I bit my lip. Maybe he was right.

I looked at him, tilting my head slightly. "Yeah, you're right. But… I’m not a teacher’s pet." I crossed my arms, then sighed. "I mean,

I won't lie… I do want to be carefree sometimes. Like you guys. Hanging out, bunking classes, no worries… just living."

Ji-yoo raised an eyebrow at me, clearly surprised.

"Really?" he asked, amusement laced in his voice. "A girl like you—class president, council member—wants to enjoy our world?"

I swallowed, but I didn't back down. "Yeah," I admitted.

Ji-yoo scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. He took another long drag from his cigarette, then turned his head and blew the smoke away from my face.

I watched him, my eyes trailing over the way his lips parted slightly, the way the grayish-white smoke curled in the air before disappearing. There was something oddly effortless about it, something that made me… curious.

What does it taste like?

The thought slipped into my mind before I could stop it.

Before I even realized what I was saying, the words left my lips.

"How does it taste?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Ji-yoo, who was about to take another drag, froze.

He blinked and turned to look at me like I had just asked the dumbest question in the world.

"What?" he said slowly. "The cigarette?"

I nodded.

He studied my face for a moment as if trying to decide if I was joking. When he saw I wasn't, a smirk tugged at his lips.

"Wanna try?" he asked, holding out the cigarette between his fingers.

I hesitated.

This was wrong.

I had never even thought about doing something like this before. I was supposed to be the responsible one, the obedient daughter, the student who followed every rule.

And yet…

I reached out and took it from him.

Ji-yoo leaned back, watching me with interest. "Don't hold it in for too long, or you'll start coughing," he warned casually.

I nodded, taking a deep breath before placing the cigarette between my lips.

The moment the smoke entered my lungs, a sharp burn spread through my chest. My throat tightened, and my body instantly rejected the foreign sensation.

I coughed. Hard.

The cigarette almost fell from my fingers as I bent forward, choking on the smoke. My eyes stung, and I tried to take in a deep breath, but that only made it worse.

Ji-yoo chuckled.

I shot him a glare through watery eyes, my pride wounded.

“I told you,” he said, clearly enjoying this. “But no, princess had to act tough.”

I took another breath, finally calming down.

“Well, that was… awful,” I muttered, my voice raspy.

Ji-yoo shook his head, smirking as he took the cigarette back from me. “Welcome to our world, princess.”

And for some reason, despite the burning sensation still lingering in my throat, I found myself smiling.

I nodded, crossing my arms. “It wasn’t *that* bad.”

Ji-yoo smirked, clearly amused by my attempt to act tough. He patted the empty space on the bench beside him, silently inviting me to sit.

I glanced at my watch and froze.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered under my breath.

Ji-yoo raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“My physics test,” I said hurriedly, stepping away. “It’s in five minutes. I have to go.”

I turned to leave, my heart racing. But just as I took a step—

“Stop.”

His voice wasn’t loud, but it was firm. An order, not a request.

I turned my head slightly, meeting his piercing gray eyes.

“Stay here, princess,” he said, taking a slow step toward me.

I swallowed. “But… it’s my test.”

Ji-yoo scoffed. “So what?” He was now standing right in front of me, arms crossed, looking down at me like he had all the power in the world.

I blinked once. Twice.

Did he seriously just say *so what*?

“It’s just a test,” he continued, his voice calm yet persuasive. “You’re the topper. One missed exam won’t kill you.”

I pressed my lips together, unsure of what to say.

He tilted his head slightly, his smirk widening. “Didn’t you just tell me you wanna bunk class?”

I hesitated. “I mean, yeah, but—”

“Then let’s go,” he interrupted, slipping his hands into his pockets. “Come with me. Let’s leave school.”

My eyes widened at his suggestion. Skip school? Me?

This was exactly what I had wished for.

The chance to be free.

To do what I wanted.

To not be the perfect student for once.

But at the same time… my mother’s voice echoed in my head. "Studies come first. You must never fail."

I shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know, Ji-yoo…”

He sighed, shaking his head as if I was the most difficult person he had ever met. “You wanna be free, but you’re too scared to take the first step.”

I stayed silent.

He stepped even closer, looking straight into my eyes. “Just once,” he said. “Live a little, princess.”

I swallowed. My heart was racing.

“Come on,” he continued, his voice softer this time. “One day. One bunk. Just once.”

I hesitated for a moment longer.

Then, without thinking too much, I slowly nodded.

Ji-yoo grinned. “That’s more like it.”

And just like that… I was about to skip school for the first time in my life.

Before I could process what I had just agreed to, Ji-yoo grabbed my hand and ran.

“Wha—wait!” I protested, but he didn’t stop.

His grip was firm, his palm warm against mine, and I had no choice but to follow his pace as he dragged me through the schoolyard. My heart pounded—not from fear, but from the sheer thrill of it. Skipping school? Running away with Kim Ji-yoo?

The wind rushed against my face as we bolted toward the back gate of Seonghwa Academy.

“We can’t—how are we getting out?” I gasped, barely keeping up with his long strides.

Ji-yoo shot me a smug glance. “Like this.”

Before I could even ask what he meant, he led me toward a gap in the fence—a spot behind the sports field where the metal bars had been slightly bent, just enough for someone to squeeze through.

I stopped in my tracks. “No way. We’ll get caught.”

He rolled his eyes. “Only if you keep standing here like an idiot.”

Without another word, he bent down and slid through effortlessly. On the other side, he turned to face me, hands in his pockets, his expression daring.

“Your choice, princess.”

I hesitated. The responsible, logical part of me was screaming to stop. But another part—the part that wanted to feel alive—urged me forward.

I took a deep breath, bent down, and slipped through the gap.

Ji-yoo smirked. “Good girl.”

I shot him a glare, but before I could say anything, he grabbed my wrist again and ran.

We sprinted through the empty streets of Velmora, weaving through narrow alleyways and dodging curious glances from

shopkeepers. The city was alive with the sounds of honking cars, chatter, and the occasional bicycle bell.

Ji-yoo didn't tell me where we were going, and I didn't ask. I just ran with him.

For the first time in my life, I felt free.

—

After a few minutes, he finally slowed down, leading me to an unfinished construction site.

I frowned. "Why here?"

Ji-yoo grinned, running a hand through his messy hair. "Because no one comes here. No teachers, no school rules. Just us."

I looked around. The building was only half-built—gray cement walls, exposed steel beams, and a few wooden planks stacked in the corner. Dust floated in the air, caught in the golden morning light.

"This place is a mess," I muttered.

Ji-yoo chuckled. "Yeah, that's the point."

Before I could respond, he jumped up onto a stack of bricks, balancing like a tightrope walker. "Come on, princess. Have some fun."

I crossed my arms. "I don't do 'fun' in abandoned buildings."

He rolled his eyes. "Boring."

Then, without warning, he hopped down and grabbed my shoulders.

“Yah—what are you—”

“Relax,” he said, spinning me around.

Suddenly, he pushed me forward, forcing me to run up a ramp made of wooden planks. I stumbled at first but caught my balance.

I turned back, glaring. “Are you crazy?”

Ji-yoo just laughed. “Obviously.”

Despite myself, I smiled. The adrenaline, the excitement… this was fun.

We spent the next hour exploring the site, climbing the unfinished staircase, throwing pebbles off the edge just to see them drop. Ji-yoo found an old can of spray paint and started drawing nonsense on the walls.

At some point, I sat down on a pile of cement bags, looking up at the open sky. The world felt so big, and for once, I wasn’t trapped in a classroom, worrying about tests and grades.

Ji-yoo flopped down next to me. “Not bad, huh?”

I exhaled, smiling. “Not bad.”

He grinned. “Told you.”

For the first time in my life, I felt like I was breaking free.

Chapter 6: Lee Gyeong Hu

I stood there, looking around, feeling something I hadn't felt in a long time—happiness. The weight of responsibilities, the pressure of being the perfect student, the burden of always doing what was right—it all felt so distant. Right now, in this moment, I was just me.

Ji-yoo watched me, his deep gray eyes unreadable.

I took a step back, completely lost in the view from the unfinished third floor of the building. The wind blew against my hair, sending a chill down my spine. And then—my foot slipped.

Before I could process what was happening, before I could even scream, a strong arm yanked me back.

Ji-yoo's grip on my waist was firm, almost bruising. My body crashed against his chest, my breath hitched.

For a second, everything froze.

I could hear nothing but the sound of our breathing, the faint pounding of my own heartbeat, and the wind howling around us. My face was so close to his chest, and I could smell the faint scent of his cologne—something dark, musky, intoxicating.

I looked up at him. He was already looking at me.

His deep gray eyes locked onto mine, his expression unreadable. There was something intense in the way he stared—something dark, something knowing. His jaw was clenched slightly, his lips just barely parted.

My heart pounded.

Maybe… just maybe… his did too.

Ji-yoo didn’t speak. He didn’t have to. His touch said enough.

Slowly, he tucked a loose strand of my hair behind my ear, his fingers grazing my skin. A shiver ran down my spine. His hand moved lower, slightly pressing against my back, keeping me steady.

I swallowed hard. “A-are you fine?” His voice was low, husky.

I tried to breathe. “I—I guess so.”

His touch was making me nervous.

I was 5'5," and he was 6'5"—a whole foot taller than me. He towered over me, his presence all-consuming, overwhelming, intoxicating.

And then… he leaned in.

I felt his breath brush against my lips.

Butterflies.

The warmth of his body seeped into mine, his grip on my waist tightening just a fraction. My breath hitched as his hand shifted, his fingers pressing lightly against my hip.

I wasn't sure if I was breathing properly anymore.

I felt trapped—not by force, but by something invisible, something dangerous.

"Wh-what are you doing, Ji-yoo?" I managed to whisper, my voice barely audible.

His eyes flickered with something unreadable. Something dark. Something dangerous.

And then—he stepped back.

The sudden loss of warmth made me shiver. He shoved his hands in his pockets, his face unreadable once again, as if the moment had never even happened.

"Tch," he scoffed, turning away. "You should be more careful next time, princess."

Just like that, the moment was gone.

But my heart?

It was still racing.

I exhaled, trying to shake off whatever had just happened.

Ji-yoo was still standing there, his hands shoved in his pockets, his posture relaxed—so carelessly confident, so effortlessly intimidating.

I cleared my throat. “I should—”

“Oh, fuck.” I suddenly realized. “It’s fifteen minutes before school ends!”

Ji-yoo raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. “So what, Gyeong-hu?” His voice was smooth, laced with amusement.

I turned to him with wide eyes. “My mother is coming to pick me up today.”

His expression didn’t change, but his eyes darkened slightly, as if understanding the weight of my words.

“Hm,” he hummed. “So that means… we have to go now.”

I nodded, straightening up. “Let’s go then.”

Just as I turned to leave, his voice stopped me.

“Wait.”

I turned to face him. His deep gray eyes were unreadable. “Yes?”

He stepped closer. Too close.

His tall frame towered over me, his presence consuming every inch of space between us. My heart pounded against my ribs.

His features were flawless—his sharp jawline, the slight curve of his lips, the way his dark hair fell over his forehead effortlessly. His uniform, as usual, was worn in complete rebellion—tie loose, blazer unbuttoned, shirt slightly untucked, the sleeves rolled up just enough to show the veins on his forearms.

His gray eyes pierced into mine with a strange intensity, as if he could see right through me.

I swallowed hard as he reached up and brushed a loose strand of my hair behind my ear.

His fingers grazed my skin. Soft. Slow. Deliberate.

I stiffened, my breath catching in my throat. What… was this?

For a moment, he just looked at me.

Silent. Unreadable.

And then, his voice dropped into a husky whisper. “If you ever need anything… tell me, alright? Even if you’re tired of being the teacher’s pet.”

I swallowed.

I wasn’t sure what to say, what to do.

So I nodded slightly.

His lips curled into a smirk, as if satisfied with my reaction. Then, he stepped back.

“Let’s go, princess.”

I exhaled sharply, finally able to breathe again, and nodded.

And just like that, we left the abandoned building.

—

We ran through the empty streets of Velmora, dodging alleys and cutting corners, making our way back toward Seonghwa Academy.

By the time we reached the school gates, my heart was racing—not from the run, but from everything that had just happened.

Ji-yoo stopped beside me, his hands still casually tucked in his pockets. He glanced at me once, then smirked.

I looked at the school building—the place where I was supposed to be all along.

The place where, until today, I had never imagined breaking the rules.

I exhaled.

And just like that, I stepped back into my world.

As I stepped back into Seonghwa Academy, my heartbeat was still unsteady. The school hallways were nearly empty, most students waiting for the final bell to ring. I had made it just in time.

I adjusted my uniform, trying to calm myself, trying to act normal. My mother couldn't find out. She wouldn't.

With a deep breath, I walked toward the school entrance, standing near the gates as students slowly trickled out.

And then— I saw her.

My mother.

Standing near her sleek black car, her arms crossed, her face completely unreadable. She was dressed in her usual sophisticated attire—a neatly pressed blouse, pencil skirt, heels that clicked against the pavement whenever she walked.

The moment her sharp eyes landed on me, I swallowed. Act normal. Just act normal.

I approached her, bowing my head slightly in greeting.

“You’re late,” she said, her voice calm but firm.

Too calm. That scared me more than her yelling.

“There was some extra student council work, mother,” I replied, my voice controlled. “I had to make sure everything was in place before I left.”

She nodded slightly, though her gaze was still piercing.

“Get in,” she said.

I opened the car door and slipped inside. The driver started the car as my mother sat beside me, her eyes scanning me as if trying to pick apart every single detail.

For a moment, there was silence. It was suffocating.

Then she finally spoke.

“What happened today?”

I glanced at her. Was this a trap? Did she know?

“What do you mean?” I asked carefully.

She sighed, leaning back against the leather seat. “Your teachers spoke highly of you again today. They always do.”

I swallowed, nodding. “I try my best.”

“You should,” she said. “It’s the least you can do.”

The least?

I stayed quiet.

She crossed her legs, adjusting her watch. “Your grades are good, Gyeong-hu, but I hope you’re not getting distracted by unnecessary things.”

Unnecessary things.

She meant friends, fun, freedom. Everything I had just experienced with Ji-yoo.

I shook my head. “No, mother. You know me. I only focus on my studies.”

Her eyes flickered to mine, sharp and unreadable. “Good,” she said. “Because if you do get distracted, I will have no choice but to take you out of that school. I’ve been thinking about homeschooling you.”

I clenched my fists.

There it was. The threat.

The one she always used whenever she felt I was slipping away from her control.

“I don’t need homeschooling, mother,” I said as steadily as I could. “I’m doing fine. My grades are good, I don’t waste my time, and I have no interest in pointless things.”

She studied me for a moment.

Then, she sighed.

“Good. You know what’s best for you.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

She looked at me for a long time, and then—finally, finally—she softened.

Her hand reached for mine, her grip firm but warm.

“I do all of this for you, Gyeong-hu,” she said, her voice quieter now. “I just want what’s best. I don’t want you to struggle. I don’t want you to make mistakes that will cost you your future.”

I nodded again. “I know.”

She sighed, and for the first time today, I saw the exhaustion in her eyes.

And then, she did something she always did when she realized she was too hard on me. She pulled me into a hug.

It was quick, firm, almost hesitant—like she wasn’t used to showing affection, but she did it anyway.

“I love you, Gyeong-hu,” she murmured.

I swallowed, closing my eyes for a moment.

“I love you too, mother.”

And just like that, the conversation was over.

I leaned against the car window, staring outside as the city of Velmora passed by in a blur.

She didn’t find out.

I should have felt relieved.

But all I could think about was how easy it was for me to lie.

Chapter 7: Kim Ji Yoo

The streets of Velmora were buzzing with life, but I walked through them like they were mine. Cigarette between my lips, hands shoved in my pockets, eyes lazy but sharp.

I stepped into the entrance of the gaming shop, pushing the glass door open with my shoulder. The familiar smell of cheap energy drinks and heated screens filled the air. Neon lights flickered, casting a blue glow over the rows of gaming stations.

As soon as I walked in, I spotted Joon-ho sitting near the counter, his headset hanging around his neck. He turned when he saw me and grinned.

“Hey, dude! Where the hell have you been today?” He stood up and high-fived me.

I smirked, exhaling smoke from the corner of my mouth before taking the cigarette between my fingers.

“I was on a bunk.”

Joon-ho blinked. “Without me?”

I took another drag, then flicked off the ash. My lips curved into a lopsided grin.

“Yeah, well... I was working on the bet.”

His eyes widened slightly. “Wait—you’re actually serious about it?”

I walked past him, heading straight to the gaming section. The screens flashed with different battles.

Joon-ho followed me, watching as I tossed my cigarette onto the floor just outside the shop before stepping in.

“What do you think? That I’d lose a bet?” I said, rolling my shoulders as I sat in a gaming chair.

Joon-ho shook his head, leaning against the arcade machine. “Nah, I know you, man. You're the biggest red flag I’ve ever met.”

I chuckled. “Hmm, you know me well.”

I leaned back, tapping my fingers on the armrest.

The bet was simple—make Gyeong-hu fall for me.

And if I lost? I'd have to bow to those arrogant pricks from the other group, the ones who thought they ran Seonghwa Academy.

I would never let that happen.

Joon-ho narrowed his eyes. “But, dude… You already have a girlfriend.”

I smirked, shaking my head. "Girlfriend?"

“Soo-ah?” I asked, raising a brow.

Joon-ho nodded.

I scoffed, standing up and walking towards him. “She’s with me because she needs sex. And I need a body next to mine.”

He gave me a look.

I shrugged, my smirk never fading. “She’ll find someone else soon enough. It’s nothing serious.”

Joon-ho hesitated before asking, “And what if she tells her mother?”

I let out a low chuckle.

“Who? That teacher’s pet, Gyeong-hu?”

I sat back down, placing my hands behind my head.

“She won’t.”

Joon-ho frowned. “How do you know?”

I let my eyes drift to the screen in front of me, watching the flashing lights of the game without really seeing it.

“Because she’s a coward. She’s afraid of her mother.” I smirked, voice smooth and confident.

“She won’t tell anyone.”

Joon-ho let out a low whistle, shaking his head. “So, Ji-yoo… She really went with you on the bunk?”

I flicked my lighter open and shut, the small flame dancing for a second before vanishing. “Yeah. She was with me.”

Joon-ho still looked doubtful. “And? Did she freak out? Try to run back?”

I smirked, exhaling a slow breath. “Nope. She looked like the happiest person on earth.” I leaned back in my chair, stretching my arms. “She liked the bunk.”

Joon-ho scoffed. “You’re lying.”

I chuckled. “And not just that…” I dragged my tongue across my lower lip before continuing. “She took a drag from my cigarette.”

His eyes nearly popped out of his skull. “No way. That teacher’s pet? No freaking way.”

I shrugged lazily. “Believe it or not, she did.”

Joon-ho was still staring at me like I had just told him the sky was red. “Unbelievable. What the hell did you say to her?”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. My voice dropped to a slow, confident drawl. “Nothing much. Just gave her a taste of freedom.” My lips curled into a smirk. “And that’s the thing, Joon-ho. You show someone a little of what they’re missing, and they start wanting more.”

Joon-ho rubbed the back of his neck. “Damn. This bet is going to be interesting.”

I grinned cruelly, my fingers tapping against the desk. “Interesting? No, Joon-ho. This bet will be the most entertaining one I’ve ever played.”

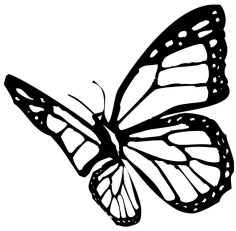
Leaning closer, my voice dropped even lower, filled with wicked amusement. “Just watch. She will hug me in front of everyone and say—” I smirked, my gaze dark and knowing.

“I love you, Ji-yoo.”

Joon-ho let out a laugh, shaking his head. “You’re insane.”

I sat back, my smirk never fading. “Maybe. But I never lose.”

Chapter 8: Lee Gyeong Hu



I stepped into my house, closing the door behind me as I leaned against it for a moment. My heart was still racing—not from fear, not from stress, but from something I had never truly felt before. Freedom.

A bright smile stretched across my lips as I walked further inside. The quietness of the house didn't bother me this time. I felt light, as if the weight of responsibilities had been lifted—if only for a short while.

I had bunked school.

I had actually done it.

I spun around, letting out a small laugh. If someone had told me yesterday that I would skip school, ride on the back of a bike with the academy's most reckless student, and— I swallowed hard at the memory—take a drag from a cigarette… I would have called them insane.

Yet, here I was.

Even though I had taken Ji-yoo to the principal's office after his fight, he had given me something in return—freedom. And for the

first time in my life, I felt like an actual teenager, not just the perfect student my mother expected me to be.

I ran up the stairs two at a time, my energy overflowing. The moment I entered my room, I twirled, humming to myself, my arms stretching out as if I were on a stage.

I sang.

Not just under my breath, not quietly in the shower, but out loud—carefree, as if no one could stop me.

I sang the lyrics of a song I had heard on the radio, my voice filling the space. I danced, moving across my room, laughing as I nearly tripped over my books.

This—this—was happiness.

A loud ringing interrupted my joy.

I stopped, panting slightly, and turned toward my bedside table. The cordless phone sat there, its small screen blinking with an incoming call.

I walked over and picked it up, pressing the button to answer.

“Hello?”

A familiar voice greeted me, warm and full of affection.

“Gyeong-hu! My princess, how are you?”

My heart swelled. “Dad!” I exclaimed, unable to hide my excitement.

I flopped onto my bed, gripping the phone tightly. “I’m great! Really, really great!”

He chuckled. “That’s good to hear. It’s been a while since I heard you this happy.”

I bit my lip, hesitating for a moment. Should I tell him? Should I let him know what I did today?

I wanted to.

He was the only one who wouldn’t scold me, the only one who would understand.

“I did something today, Appa. Something crazy.”

His interest piqued. “Oh? Do tell.”

I took a deep breath. “I… bunked school.”

There was a pause. Then—laughter.

“You? My Gyeong-hu? Bunking school? Now, that is something.”

I laughed along with him. “I know! I can’t believe it either!”

His voice softened. “Was it fun?”

I smiled, rolling onto my back, staring at the ceiling. “It was amazing. I’ve never felt this free before. I just—” I exhaled, my chest rising and falling. “I just wish I could always feel this way.”

There was a brief silence before he spoke again, gentler this time.

“You deserve to be happy, sweetheart. Even if your mother is strict, even if school keeps you tied up with responsibilities, don’t ever forget to find your own happiness too.”

My throat tightened. “I know.”

“You’re growing up so fast.” His voice carried both pride and sadness. “One day, you’ll be able to make your own choices, without fear. But until then, I’ll always be here for you.”

Tears pricked at my eyes, but they weren’t from sadness. They were from the love I had for him, the only person who made me feel like I wasn’t just a student, but a daughter.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Always, my princess.”

We talked a little more—about school, about his work, about random things. But as the conversation ended and I placed the phone back on the table, I realized something.

This happiness I felt today… I wanted more of it.

And for the first time in my life, I wasn’t afraid of breaking a few rules to get it.

I tried to focus on my studies after my call with Appa, flipping through my textbooks, underlining sentences, pretending that I was absorbing the information in front of me.

But my mind… it had other plans.

Ji-yoo.

The memory of today's events replayed in my head, stubbornly refusing to leave.

The way he was so close…

His breath had brushed against my lips, sending an unfamiliar shiver down my spine. His hand had gripped my waist with an ease that sent my heart into chaos. My breath had hitched, my body reacting before my mind could catch up.

And then, his voice.

A husky whisper, so close it felt like a secret meant only for me.

> "If you ever need anything… tell me, alright? Even if you're tired of being the teacher's pet."

I clenched my jaw, gripping my pen tighter as if that would help push the memory away.

And the way he called me—

Princess.

I shook my head, frustrated. What was wrong with me? I had never let anyone get inside my head like this before. Ji-yoo was just a reckless idiot, a troublemaker who probably found amusement in messing with people.

Then why was my heart racing even now?

I sighed, pressing my fingers to my temple. No. I wasn't going to let this affect me. I had responsibilities, a reputation to maintain. I wasn't like the other girls who swooned over him. I had control over my emotions.

Or at least… I thought I did.

Pushing the thoughts away, I forced myself to focus. Study. Study. Study.

By the time dinner rolled around, I had somewhat succeeded in distracting myself. I sat at the dining table, my posture straight, my mind still half-stuck in the day's events.

The maid moved silently, placing dishes in front of me. The rich aroma of kimchi jjigae and freshly steamed rice filled the air.

My mother sat across from me, her usual poised self, eating delicately, barely making a sound.

And then, she spoke.

"How was your test?"

I froze.

The spoon in my hand trembled slightly as I scooped up some rice. I forced a neutral expression, but my throat suddenly felt dry.

I took a bite, trying to act natural—

And then I choked.

Coughing, I quickly reached for my water, gulping it down as my mother's sharp eyes studied me.

She raised an eyebrow. "Gyeong-hu?"

I set the glass down, clearing my throat. Think. Think. Think.

“Oh… the test?” I tried to sound casual. “Umm, it got canceled.”

A beat of silence.

My mother’s chopsticks paused midair.

“Canceled?” Her tone was unreadable, but that only made it more terrifying.

I nodded, keeping my face calm. “Yes. The teacher said she wasn’t feeling well, so she postponed it.”

Another pause.

I kept my expression neutral, my heart hammering in my chest.

My mother watched me for a long moment, her gaze piercing. Then, with a small nod, she returned to her meal.

She believed me.

I mentally exhaled.

“Alright. Then, you’ll have more time to prepare. Make sure you do well.”

I nodded obediently. “Of course, Mother.”

Inside, I felt a strange satisfaction. I had lied. And I was good at it.

I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. But tonight, I decided not to care.

For once, I had control over my own life.

And I liked it.

I went into my room and lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. A small smile tugged at my lips.

At least I had a friend.

Kim Ji-yoo.

I never thought I would call him that, but today, for the first time in a long while, I had felt… free. He offered me that freedom.

As I closed my eyes, a memory from yesterday drifted into my mind.

The moment he collapsed into me.

The sudden impact, the way I fell to the floor, the way he had looked at me before offering his hand.

I had taken it hesitantly, feeling the warmth of his palm against mine as he pulled me up. Then, without a word, he had picked up my fallen glasses, placed them in my hands, and walked away—chasing after that boy like nothing had happened.

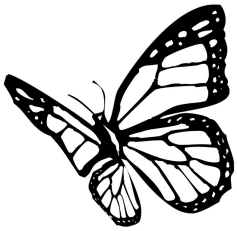
I exhaled, rolling onto my side.

He was reckless, unpredictable, and completely different from me.

And yet…

I didn’t mind his presence.

Chapter 9: Lee Gyeong-hu



Morning light streamed through my window, painting my room in soft hues of gold. It was a new day.

I stretched my arms and let out a yawn before finally getting out of bed. My body still felt light, the remnants of last night's happiness lingering in me. I had never felt that free before.

Humming to myself, I grabbed my towel and stepped into the bathroom.

The warm water cascaded down my skin as I ran my fingers through my damp hair. My voice automatically followed the melody in my head, rising and falling with the song.

Singing was something I loved.

Something I wanted to do in front of people.

But… Mother never allowed it.

Still, in the privacy of the bathroom, with the steam swirling around me and water hitting the tiles, I let my voice out—free, powerful, and full of emotions I couldn't express anywhere else.

I spun around, laughing, dancing under the water as if I were performing on stage. If only… if only I could do this for real.

After a few more moments of losing myself in the music, I turned off the shower, stepping out as the cold air hit my skin.

I wrapped myself in a towel, looking at my reflection in the fogged-up mirror. I smiled at myself, pushing away any lingering sadness about my unfulfilled dream.

Not today. Today was going to be good.

I changed out of my night suit and slipped into my school uniform—a neatly ironed white blouse and a dark skirt.

Instead of leaving my hair loose like usual, I tied it into two low ponytails—one on the left and one on the right. It made me look younger, maybe even a little different than my usual serious self.

After making sure everything was in place, I grabbed my bag and headed downstairs.

The familiar scent of freshly cooked rice and side dishes filled the dining area. The maid was setting up the table as I sat down.

Breakfast was quiet, just like every other morning. My mother wasn't around, which wasn't surprising—she was either working early or handling business calls in her study.

I quickly ate, not wanting to be late. After finishing, I wiped my mouth and got up.

Outside, the family's black car was already waiting. The driver opened the door for me, and I stepped in.

The ride to school was calm, the city passing by in a blur.

And then, as we approached Seonghwa Academy, my stomach fluttered for reasons I didn't quite understand.

Maybe today would be different like yesterday?

The car rolled to a stop in front of Seonghwa Academy. I adjusted my glasses, exhaled deeply, and stepped out. No bunking today. I had already taken my fair share of risks yesterday, and I wasn't about to repeat it.

The moment I walked through the school gates, I could hear the usual chatter of students. Some were gossiping, some were rushing to their classes, and some were simply enjoying the morning before school officially began.

I adjusted my bag on my shoulder and was about to head straight to class when—

"Princess."

That voice.

I turned my head and there he was. Kim Ji-yoo.

Leaning against the school's brick wall near the entrance, his hands stuffed into his pockets, his tie loosely hanging around his neck like he couldn't care less. His deep gray eyes held that ever-present glint of mischief, and his lips curved into a smirk as he pushed himself off the wall.

I raised an eyebrow. "What?"

He walked toward me, slow and lazy, like he had all the time in the world.

“No bunking today?” he asked, tilting his head slightly, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I scoffed. “Unlike you, I actually care about my studies.”

Ji-yoo placed a hand over his heart dramatically. “Ouch, Princess. That almost hurt.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to leave, but he quickly fell into step beside me, walking with me toward the school building.

“So, you didn’t have fun yesterday?” he asked casually.

I hesitated for a second but kept my expression neutral. Fun? It was the most fun I’d ever had. But there was no way I was going to tell *him* that.

“It was… okay.” I shrugged.

Ji-yoo let out a small laugh. “Just okay? Come on, don’t lie. You were smiling like an idiot the whole time.”

“I was not!” I said, glaring at him.

He grinned. “Oh, but you were. You were practically glowing. Almost like—” He leaned in closer, voice dropping slightly. “—you liked being free.”

I pressed my lips together, because he wasn’t wrong.

I did like it.

Ji-yoo watched me carefully, like he was waiting for me to admit it. But I just pushed my glasses up my nose and sighed.

“Why do you even care?” I muttered.

Ji-yoo chuckled. “I don’t.”

I shot him a deadpan look.

He smirked again, then suddenly reached out—his fingers brushing lightly against my sleeve before pulling away. “You know, Princess… you should smile more. It suits you.”

I felt my face heat up.

“Why are you like this?” I mumbled, looking away.

He laughed. “Like what?”

“Annoying.”

Ji-yoo grinned. “Because it’s fun to annoy you.”

I exhaled sharply. Of course.

We reached the hallway where our classes were. Ji-yoo stopped walking and leaned against the wall again, looking at me with an unreadable expression.

“So… see you at lunch?” he asked.

I blinked. “What? Why?”

He smirked. “Why not?”

I frowned slightly, unsure if he was being serious or just messing with me.

But before I could say anything, he pushed himself off the wall and started walking away, casually waving a hand over his shoulder.

“Later, Princess.”

I stood there for a moment, feeling oddly warm inside for no reason at all.

And then, with a small shake of my head, I sighed and went to class.

After a while in class.

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But before I could say anything, he pushed himself off the wall and started walking away, casually waving a hand over his shoulder.

“Later, Princess.”

I stood there for a moment, feeling oddly warm inside for no reason at all.

And then, with a small shake of my head, I sighed and went to class.

The moment the bell rang, signaling lunch break, I let out a relieved sigh.

Finally.

I stood up from my seat, smoothing out my uniform as I gathered my things. The classroom quickly became noisy, students chatting and laughing as they headed out for lunch.

Like always, I walked alone.

Seonghwa Academy’s cafeteria was a large, open space with long tables where students sat together in groups. Some carried trays of food from the lunch counter, while others brought meals from home. The air was filled with the scent of warm rice, kimchi, and fried chicken.

I usually found a quiet corner to sit in, away from the crowds. I wasn’t used to the whole ‘having friends’ thing, so sitting alone felt… normal.

But just as I pulled out a chair to sit—

“Bhoo!”

“AH!” I yelped, practically jumping out of my skin.

My heart pounded as I spun around, my breath still caught in my throat.

And there he was.

Kim Ji-yoo.

He was laughing. No—he was dying of laughter, holding his stomach like I had just made the funniest joke in the world.

I glared at him, pressing a hand to my chest as I tried to calm my racing heart. “Ji-yoo! Seriously?! Are you 18 or 8? You almost gave me a heart attack!”

He wiped a tear from his eye, still chuckling. “Come on, princess. You should’ve seen your face! That was priceless.”

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head. “Not funny.”

“Oh, it was very funny.” His smirk was smug as ever.

I huffed and sat down, pretending to ignore him, but my heart was still hammering in my chest.

Ji-yoo pulled out the chair across from me and sat down, resting his arms lazily on the table. His gaze flickered around the cafeteria before landing back on me.

“Why are you sitting alone?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Because I always stay alone. You know that.”

He tilted his head, raising an eyebrow. “Oh, come on, princess. Then who am I? A ghost?”

I blinked, caught off guard by his words.

“No, I mean… you weren’t here, so I was alone.”

His lips curled into a smirk, as if he had won some invisible argument. Then, without warning, he reached across the table and grabbed my hand.

“Come on, princess.”

I froze at the sudden contact. His hand was warm, his grip firm but not forceful.

“W-where?” I stammered, looking at him in confusion.

His eyes glinted mischievously. “Let me introduce you to my friends. I hope you’ll like them.”

I hesitated.

Ji-yoo had *friends*. That wasn’t surprising. But the idea of meeting them? That was a different story.

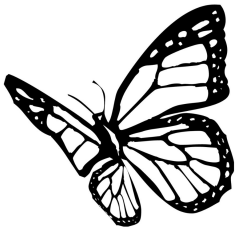
I wasn’t used to hanging out with people, let alone his kind of people.

But before I could protest, he tugged me up from my seat, his smirk never fading.

“Trust me, princess. This will be fun.”

And just like that, I found myself being pulled into Kim Ji-yoo’s fucking world.

Chapter 10: Lee Gyeong Hu



Ji-yoo led me through the bustling cafeteria, weaving between tables filled with students chatting and laughing over their meals. My heart pounded with every step.

I wasn't nervous—I was just… not used to this.

And then we stopped.

A table near the back, occupied by a group of students that looked effortlessly cool, was waiting ahead of me.

There were two girls and three boys sitting there, casually eating, laughing, and throwing playful insults at each other. The moment Ji-yoo and I approached, they all looked up, their eyes shifting between us.

Ji-yoo smirked and gestured toward me.

"Hey, guys. Meet her. She is—"

Before he could finish, one of the girls' eyes went wide.

"Lee?" she gasped.

Another girl blinked in shock. "Gyeong—"

And then one of the boys finished, “Hu?”

The entire table fell silent, all of them staring at me like I had just walked in wearing an alien suit.

I resisted the urge to fidget under their gazes.

Oh, right. I was Lee Gyeong-hu.

The girl who never spoke to anyone.
The class president who was all about grades, discipline, and responsibilities.
The girl who never had friends and was never seen with anyone—especially someone like Ji-yoo.

To them, seeing me here must have felt like watching a penguin suddenly start flying.

Ji-yoo chuckled at their reactions, completely entertained.

I, on the other hand, wanted to disappear.

But I had to admit—they all looked cool.

Unlike me, they didn’t seem to care about strict rules, endless studies, or maintaining a ‘perfect’ image. They looked so… free.

Ji-yoo, still smirking, turned to me and casually pointed at each of them.

“Let me introduce you properly.

This idiot right here is my best friend, Joon-ho.”

The guy sitting closest to Ji-yoo grinned. He had messy dark brown hair, sharp fox-like eyes, and a laid-back expression that screamed ‘troublemaker.’

“Yo, princess. Welcome to the dark side,” Joon-ho joked, giving me a lazy salute.

I frowned. “Princess? Are you going to call me that too?”

“Of course.” He winked. “Ji-yoo never shuts up about you, so we had to know what was so special about this ‘princess’ of his.”

I shot a glare at Ji-yoo, who only chuckled.

Moving on, Ji-yoo pointed at the girl sitting beside Joon-ho.

“This is Hye-jin.”

Hye-jin had shoulder-length, wavy brown hair and bright eyes that held a mischievous glint. She rested her chin on her hand, smirking at me.

“Wow. The famous Lee Gyeong-hu is actually standing in front of me. This is unreal.”

I sighed. “I’m not that special.”

“Oh, you are,” she teased. “Everyone at Seonghwa knows you. The untouchable, rule-abiding, bookworm class president. And now you’re hanging out with us? What happened? Did you hit your head?”

Ji-yoo laughed. “She just decided to live a little.”

Hye-jin raised an eyebrow, clearly amused.

Then, Ji-yoo gestured to the second girl, who was chewing gum with her arms crossed.

“That’s So-mi.”

So-mi had jet-black hair tied in a high ponytail and sharp, cat-like eyes. She looked at me up and down, then scoffed.

“I never thought I’d see the day.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or an insult.

Ji-yoo moved on before I could respond. He pointed at the last guy, who was leaning back in his chair with a bored expression.

“And this is Dong-hyun.”

Dong-hyun had long-ish dark hair that fell over his forehead and a lazy smirk on his face. He waved half-heartedly.

“Sup.”

I nodded awkwardly. “Hi.”

The silence stretched for a second too long. They were still looking at me like I didn’t belong.

I shifted uncomfortably. Maybe this was a bad idea.

Ji-yoo, noticing my hesitation, suddenly threw an arm around my shoulder.

“Relax, princess. They don’t bite.”

Hye-jin smirked. “Depends on the day.”

Joon-ho snorted. “True.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great. That’s comforting.”

They all chuckled, and somehow, the tension in the air lightened.

Hye-jin and So-mi were surprisingly nice to me. I had expected them to act distant or at least a little cold—after all, I wasn’t exactly the social type. But instead, they welcomed me like I had always been part of their group.

Hye-jin leaned on the table, resting her chin in her hand as she grinned at me. “I can’t believe I’m talking to the ‘legendary’ Lee Gyeong-hu. You know, I always thought you were some kind of robot.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “A robot?”

So-mi nodded eagerly. “Yeah! You never talked to anyone, never looked distracted, always just… studying. We thought you didn’t even have emotions.”

I rolled my eyes. “Wow. That’s dramatic.”

Joon-ho smirked. “No, but seriously, you were like some mysterious, untouchable queen of the school. We’d see you walking through the halls, books in hand, glasses perfectly in place, and it was like—woosh—no one dared to approach.”

Ji-yoo, who had been lazily drinking his soda, suddenly leaned in with a smirk. “And now look at her. Sitting with us. Eating with us. Making friends.”

Hye-jin grinned. “Turns out, you’re actually kinda cool.”

I scoffed. “What, did you expect me to be boring?”

So-mi shook her head. “No, just… different.” She smiled. “But I like this side of you.”

For a moment, I just sat there, feeling something warm in my chest.

They were my… friends.

Not people whispering about me behind my back.
Not students who only saw me as a ‘teacher’s pet’ or a ‘walking gradebook.’
Friends.

I smiled. “I like this side of me too.”

As we continued talking, the conversation got even more fun.

Hye-jin leaned forward with a smirk. “So, Gyeong-hu, tell me—how did Ji-yoo manage to drag you into his world? He’s not exactly the ‘study group’ type.”

I chuckled, glancing at Ji-yoo, who was lazily sipping his soda. “He didn’t drag me. I kind of… walked in myself.”

So-mi gasped dramatically. “You walked in? On your own? Unbelievable.”

Joon-ho laughed. “Nah, I bet Ji-yoo had something to do with it. He’s always up to something.”

Ji-yoo smirked and stretched his arms. “I don’t know what you guys are talking about. I’m innocent.”

Hye-jin rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. Anyway, it’s kinda fun having you here, Gyeong-hu. I never thought I’d see the day.”

I smiled. “Well, I never thought I’d have lunch with the ‘cool seniors’ either, but here we are.”

Joon-ho chuckled. “You fit in better than I expected.”

Before I could respond, the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. I looked down at my tray, realizing I had barely eaten.

So-mi groaned. “Ugh, already? That was fast.”

Hye-jin stretched. “Guess we gotta head back to class.”

I stood up, grabbing my tray. “Yeah, I should go too.”

Ji-yoo smirked. “Good girl. Don’t start bunking because of us.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Wait… are you guys bunking?”

Joon-ho grinned. “Maaaybe.”

So-mi waved her hand. “We’ll see where the day takes us.”

Hye-jin sighed dramatically. “But you, our dear Gyeong-hu, are too responsible for such things, so run along to class.”

I shook my head, smiling. “Yeah, yeah. See you all later.”

Ji-yoo leaned back in his chair, watching me with an amused expression. “Go be the perfect student, Princess.”

I rolled my eyes and walked away, feeling something I hadn't felt before.

Maybe, just maybe… this school year wouldn’t be so boring after all.

The rest of the day passed in a blur, the usual dull routine of classes weighing down on me like a heavy blanket.

After lunch, I returned to my classroom, expecting at least something interesting to happen. But no, everything was just as it had always been—strict teachers, endless lectures, and the sound of pages flipping as students took notes.

I tried to focus, but my mind kept wandering. Ji-yoo and his friends were nothing like what I had imagined. They weren't just rebellious troublemakers; they were… fun. They didn't judge me for being the 'nerd' of the school. If anything, they treated me like one of them.

I tapped my pen on my notebook absentmindedly as I stared at the blackboard, but the words written there barely registered.

"Lee Gyeong-hu."

I snapped out of my thoughts and looked up. The literature teacher, Miss Sheena, was watching me with a raised eyebrow.

"Are you feeling unwell?" she asked, her voice calm but observant.

I quickly straightened up. "No, ma'am. I'm fine."

She studied me for a second longer before nodding. "Alright, but if something is bothering you, don't hesitate to talk."

I gave a small nod, trying to ignore the way some of my classmates glanced at me.

Why was I spacing out so much today?

The rest of the day dragged on painfully. Every class felt longer than usual, and I couldn't shake off the feeling of restlessness.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the final bell rang. I packed my things quickly, eager to leave.

When I got home, I was exhausted. I threw my bag on the couch and stretched my arms.

“Welcome home, Miss,” the maid greeted me.

I gave her a small smile and nodded before heading to my room.

The first thing I did? Jump onto my bed and let out a deep sigh.

What a day.

A part of me wished I had stayed with Ji-yoo and the others. Maybe bunking wouldn’t have been such a bad idea.

I turned onto my side, staring at the ceiling. My mind drifted back to the moment Ji-yoo had grabbed my hand at lunch.

Why did that feel so… natural?

I shook my head. No. Stop thinking about him.

To distract myself, I forced myself to study for a bit. But even then, I kept spacing out, remembering the way Ji-yoo had called me ‘Princess’ in that teasing voice.

After about an hour of pretending to be productive, it was dinner time.

As usual, my mother was already at the dining table when I arrived. The food was neatly served, and the room was quiet except for the clinking of utensils.

She glanced at me. "You're home early today. No school council work?"

I shook my head. "No, not today."

She nodded before elegantly cutting her food. "Good. You need to focus on your studies. You already have too many responsibilities."

I chewed my food slowly before responding. "Mom… do you think I should have more friends?"

She looked up at me, slightly surprised by the question. "Why are you asking this all of a sudden?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. I just… I made some new friends today."

She took a sip of her water before speaking. "Friends can be a distraction, Gyeong-hu. You are a smart girl, and I trust you to choose wisely."

That was the closest thing to approval I would ever get.

After dinner, I went straight to my room and changed into my comfortable nightwear. I turned on my lamp, pulled out my journal, and began writing down everything that had happened today.

From meeting Ji-yoo's friends to nearly getting caught in class, it had been a rollercoaster of a day.

As I closed my journal and turned off the light, I smiled to myself.

Maybe, just maybe, life was about to get a little more interesting.

Chapter 11: Kim Ji Yoo

I walked down the quiet back alley behind the school, the cigarette burning slowly between my fingers. The cool air mixed with the sharp scent of smoke, and the only sound was the distant noise of students still hanging around. Joon-ho strolled beside me, hands stuffed into his pockets, his usual lazy smirk on his face.

"You know," he started, glancing at me, "it's only been two days, and she's already hanging around you."

I took a slow drag from my cigarette, letting the smoke curl into the air before responding. "And?"

Joon-ho chuckled. "And you two already bunked once together, and today she sat with us for lunch."

I smirked. "That’s the whole point, isn’t it?"

Joon-ho looked at me, raising a brow. "Yeah, but… what if, because of this bet, you actually fall for the teacher’s pet?"

I rolled my eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck. "Shut up. Just look at her, man. She’s so ugly. She doesn’t even know how to get ready. Did you see those two ponytails?"

Joon-ho burst out laughing. "Come on, dude, don't be so serious. I was just joking."

I took another slow drag, watching the smoke fade into the sky.

"But I won't lie," Joon-ho continued, his tone more thoughtful. "She actually has a good sense of humor. She's not the nerd we all thought she was. She's kinda cool."

I smirked, putting the cigarette back in my mouth before speaking. "I think you got a crush on her."

Joon-ho gave me an unimpressed look and chuckled. "No way, man. I was just saying. And you know exactly what kind of girls I like."

I let out a short laugh. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

Joon-ho smirked but didn't say anything else. I could tell he was still thinking about her.

The thing is, I knew Gyeong-hu wasn't like other girls. She had this fire in her that made her different. But for me, this was just a game. A bet that I was going to win.

And in the end, she was going to hug me in front of everyone and say, *I love you, Ji-yoo.*

I took one last drag before flicking the cigarette to the ground and crushing it under my foot.

Game on.

"Man, you really should stop smoking so much," he said lazily, kicking a stray rock on the pavement.

I scoffed. "And you should stop acting like my mom."

He chuckled. "Fine, whatever. But I *do* have something for you."

I raised a brow. "Yeah? What?"

Joon-ho smirked. "A challenge."

I crossed my arms. "I'm listening."

"Chess. Tomorrow. After school. Let's see if that brain of yours actually works outside of punching people and causing chaos."

I let out a laugh. "You think you can beat me in chess?"

Joon-ho shrugged. "I *know* I can beat you in chess."

"Bet."

He grinned. "Bet."

We shook on it before parting ways, him heading off toward his house and me walking toward mine.

I lived with my grandfather—my mother's father. Ever since my parents split up, my mom had left me in his care while she moved on with her life. She still called sometimes, sending money and checking in, but I didn't really care.

As I walked up to the old house, the warm yellow lights from inside spilled out onto the porch. I sighed, rolling my shoulders before stepping in.

Another night, another day gone.

And tomorrow?

I was winning that chess match.

I pushed open the heavy wooden doors of my grandfather's mansion, stepping inside as the familiar scent of old books and polished wood filled my lungs. This house… it had history. It wasn't just a place to live—it was proof of my grandfather's journey from having nothing to becoming one of the most successful businessmen in Velmora.

He came here as a poor man, with barely a penny to his name. But with years of sweat, struggle, and sheer determination, he built himself an empire. At 35, he had everything he had once dreamed of. Now, at 76, he still chose to live here rather than in the fancy apartments or modern villas he owned.

I didn't blame him. This mansion wasn't just a house; it was a symbol of his hard work. And to me, he wasn't just my grandfather—he was my everything. More than a guardian, more than family—he was my best friend. He understood me in a way no one else ever could.

I walked into the grand living room, where he was sitting on his usual armchair, reading a newspaper. The fireplace crackled beside him, casting warm shadows across the room.

He looked up the moment he heard my footsteps. "You're late," he said in his usual calm voice, folding the newspaper.

I grinned. "Didn't know there was a curfew."

"There isn't," he said, raising an eyebrow. "But I still like to know where my grandson spends his time."

I flopped down on the couch across from him, stretching my arms. “Nothing much. Just school, hanging out with Joon-ho, you know… the usual.”

He chuckled. “You and that boy… always up to something.”

I smirked but said nothing. If he knew exactly what Joon-ho and I were up to, he’d probably have a heart attack. My grandfather was a wise man, but there were certain things I preferred to keep hidden from him—like my smoking habit, the bets I made, and the little chaos I caused at school.

He studied me for a moment before speaking. “You know, Ji-yoo, I’ve been thinking about something.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s dangerous.”

He laughed. “Listen, you brat. I know you’re not the type to sit in an office all day like I did, but have you ever thought about your future?”

I leaned back into the couch. “Not really. I live in the present, Grandpa. Future can wait.”

He sighed. “That’s what worries me. You’re smart, Ji-yoo, but you can’t just go through life floating wherever the wind takes you.”

I looked at him, seeing the concern in his eyes. He wasn’t scolding me—he never did. He just wanted me to think. But thinking too much about the future? That wasn’t my style.

I gave him a lopsided grin. “I’ll figure it out. Maybe I’ll become a rockstar.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “You can do anything you want, Ji-yoo. Just don’t waste your potential.”

I nodded, though deep down, I wasn’t sure what my potential even was.

A comfortable silence settled between us before he spoke again. “Dinner’s ready. Eat before you go hiding in your room like a ghost.”

I laughed, standing up. “Yeah, yeah, old man. Let’s eat.”

He rolled his eyes, but I could see the fondness in them.

Even if I had no clue about my future, one thing was certain—no matter what happened, my grandfather would always have my back.

Dinner was already set when I walked into the dining room with Harabeoji—my grandfather. The rich, warm scent of Korean cuisine filled the air, and my stomach immediately growled in approval. Every dish on the table was my favorite. I raised an eyebrow, looking at him suspiciously.

“Well, today is not my birthday,” I said, taking a seat.

Harabeoji chuckled, shaking his head. “Yeah, I know. Just sit down, young man.”

I smirked and sat across from him. “So, what’s the occasion? You don’t just spoil me like this for no reason.”

He leaned back in his chair, a playful glint in his old but sharp eyes. “Can’t a grandfather treat his grandson once in a while?”

I chuckled, picking up my chopsticks. “Not when it’s all my favorite food. What do you want?”

He laughed. “You really think I have an agenda every time I do something nice?”

I tilted my head. “Pretty much.”

Harabeoji shook his head, a knowing smile on his face. “Alright, fine. Maybe I just wanted to remind you that you have a home here, no matter what happens out there. And maybe…” he took a bite of his food before continuing, “I just wanted to see you smile after a long day.”

I paused, my chopsticks hovering over my plate for a second before I smirked. “That’s kinda corny, old man.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. But it’s true.”

I was about to reply when suddenly, arms wrapped around my shoulders from behind, and a soft kiss landed on my head.

I stiffened immediately.

Turning back, I saw Umma standing behind me, her warm eyes filled with an unfamiliar softness. My mother.

I immediately stood up, blinking in shock. “Umma? You here?”

She cupped my face, smiling gently. “Why? Can’t a mother come to see her son when she misses him?”

I stared at her, caught off guard. “Missed me?”

She nodded. “Yes, missed you.”

I didn't know what to say. My mother and I never had this kind of relationship—not the affectionate, loving kind. She had always been distant, cold even. But now? Now she was sitting beside me, calm, warm, almost… different.

She gestured for me to sit, and I obeyed, still trying to process what was happening.

"Eat," she said softly. "I made all of this just for you."

I looked at her again, searching for something—maybe a hidden motive, maybe a trick. But all I saw was sincerity.

Nodding, I picked up my chopsticks and took a bite. The taste hit me immediately—it had been so long since I ate food made by my mother. It was nostalgic, but I refused to let myself be overwhelmed by emotions.

"So?" she asked, watching me closely. "How's the food?"

I chewed slowly before answering, "It's good. Been a long time since I had food made by you."

She smiled at my words, and for a brief moment, it felt like everything was normal—like we were an actual family.

Harabeoji, watching our interaction, smiled softly. Then, as if sensing that we needed time alone, he placed his chopsticks down. "Little champ," he said, ruffling my hair, "I'm going for a walk. Enjoy your meal."

I looked up at him, knowing exactly why he was leaving. He wanted me to have this moment with her. He knew that deep down, I needed it.

"Alright, old man," I said.

With that, he stood up and walked out, leaving me alone with my mother.

She called my name softly. “Ji-yoo.”

I looked at her. “Hmm?”

She hesitated for a moment, then finally spoke. “Your father was saying that—”

Before she could finish, I cut her off immediately. “He is not my father,” I said, my voice calm but carrying an unmistakable warning. “Just your husband.”

She exhaled deeply, as if she expected this reaction.

“My father died a long time ago,” I added, my expression cold.

She didn’t argue. Instead, she took a deep breath and changed the topic.

“He was saying… why doesn’t Ji-yoo come live with us?”

I scoffed, placing my chopsticks down. “I’m fine here with Harabeoji.”

She sighed, looking at me with a mix of frustration and something else—something I couldn’t quite place. “Ji-yoo, I don’t need an argument.” Her voice suddenly turned sharper, colder. The softness was gone. “You’re coming with me to Seoul.”

I clenched my jaw. And just like that, the ‘loving mother’ act was over.

I exhaled sharply, anger slowly rising. “That’s it? The fever of motherly love is already gone?”

She looked at me, anger flashing in her eyes. Her voice rose, sharp and commanding.

“Why do you disobey me, Ji-yoo?”

I met her gaze, my own anger burning just as fiercely. “And why don’t you love me the way you love your stepson, Seo-jun? Like he’s your real son?”

I pushed my chair back and stood up, my appetite completely gone.

She scoffed, shaking her head. “I was aware that you would take out your anger on food.”

I turned to her, my voice cold. “You were aware, but you still started this conversation at dinner?”

Without waiting for a response, I turned and walked away, my heart pounding with frustration. Why did I even let myself believe, for one second, that tonight would be different?

As I stormed to my room, my mind spun back to the past—the life I had tried to forget, but one that always crept back when I least expected it.

My father died in a car accident in 1983. I was only one year old. Too young to remember his face, too young to understand what it meant to lose a father.

When I was barely two and a half years old, my mother remarried. She married a businessman, a man who already had a son, Seo-jun, from his previous marriage. A man who hated me.

I was nothing to him. He never treated me as a son, never even pretended. He was an egoistic, cruel man who made sure I felt unwanted every second I was around him.

Then, my mother had a daughter with him—my half-sister.

And just like that, she had a new family.

She had her husband, her stepson, her daughter, and her mother-in-law, all living together in Seoul. A perfect picture. A family where I never fit.

Whenever she visited me, she never came to check if I was doing okay. She never hugged me, never held me, never told me she missed me.

She came only to complain.

“Ji-yoo, you should be more like Seo-jun.”

“Ji-yoo, why are you always like this?”

“Ji-yoo, you’re never enough.”

Never once did she love me the way a mother should.

And with time, I stopped expecting her to. I learned how to live without her.

I learned how to stop needing her.

But I was never alone.

My grandfather—my Harabeoji—he became my everything.

He was my mother, my father, my best friend.

When my own mother pushed me away, he pulled me closer. When my stepfather tried to break me, he built me up.

He taught me how to stand tall, how to face the world with a smirk instead of tears. He never let me feel unloved.

Our bond was stronger than blood, stronger than the past, stronger than anything they could take from me.

I exhaled deeply, gripping the edge of my desk as I let the anger settle. I refused to let them affect me anymore.

Looking out of my window at the dark night sky, I let out a bitter chuckle.

“Guess I was right. The fever of motherly love didn’t last long.”

And with that thought, I closed my eyes, letting the darkness swallow me whole.

But I love her more than she could ever know

Chapter 12: Kim Ji Yoo

The next morning, I woke up feeling heavy.

Not physically, but deep inside, like a weight pressed against my chest, refusing to lift. I knew exactly what it was.

Umma.

Her words from last night still echoed in my head, stirring something I didn't want to acknowledge. But I wasn't going to sit here and drown in it.

I was used to this.

I had lived through it enough times to know that expecting anything else was pointless.

With a sharp exhale, I pushed the covers off and got out of bed. No hesitation, no dragging myself around. I needed to shake this feeling off.

I headed straight for the bathroom and turned on the shower. Cold water. The kind that wakes you up in an instant, shocks your senses, and forces your mind to clear.

But even as the water poured down on me, even as I stood there with my head tilted back, eyes closed, letting the chill sink into my bones—I still felt it.

That dull ache that refused to leave.

I sighed. "Fuck it."

There was only one thing that ever helped me get rid of my anger.

After stepping out of the bathroom, I dried off quickly, slipped into my usual clothes, and reached for the one thing that never failed me—

My guitar.

The second my fingers touched the strings, I felt a rush of familiarity. Like an old friend who always understood. I started playing, letting the raw, aggressive chords of rock music fill the silence of my room.

The sound vibrated through my body, shaking off the leftover frustration and anger. I lost myself in it, allowing the music to consume every thought, every emotion.

For those moments, nothing else mattered.

A knock on the door.

I ignored it.

The door creaked open anyway, and a servant stepped inside. He stood by the door, hesitant, before finally speaking.

“Harabeoji is calling you for breakfast.”

I didn’t even pause, my fingers still strumming against the strings. I barely glanced at him.

“Tell him I’m not hungry.”

The servant nodded and left without another word.

I continued playing.

But not even five minutes later, the door opened again.

This time, I didn’t need to turn around to know who it was.

“Ji-yoo.”

The moment I heard his voice, I stopped playing. Not because I wanted to, but because he was the only person I could never ignore.

I didn’t turn to look at him. Instead, I just placed my hands over the strings, silencing them.

I felt the weight of the bed shift as he sat next to me.

“You’re upset.”

I stayed still, my gaze fixed ahead. “No.”

He didn’t buy it. He never did.

“Ji-yoo, she loves you.”

A humorless chuckle escaped me. “Yeah, I can really see all that love.”

He sighed. “She can be harsh sometimes, but she cares about you.”

I said nothing.

Because there was nothing to say.

Instead, I carefully set my guitar down beside me. I wasn’t in the mood to argue, but I wasn’t in the mood to pretend either.

There was a long silence before he spoke again, this time softer.

“I don’t know when things will get better for you… but until I’m alive, I won’t let you feel empty.”

I turned to look at him, and for the first time this morning, I smiled.

A small, tired, but genuine smile.

I leaned forward and pulled him into a hug. A tight one.

“What do you want, old man? You trying to make me cry now?”

He chuckled, hugging me back. “Hey! Stop calling me old man. You know I’m not that old. Still got a lot of women dying for my smile.”

This time, I actually laughed. A real one.

Because no matter how fucked up everything else in my life was, no matter how much my mother ignored me, or how much I hated the past—

I still had him.

And for now, that was enough.

Harabeoji sighed, rubbing his temples before looking at me. "Ji-yoo, go and talk to your mother."

I frowned, already shaking my head. "No, I won't. She won't listen. She only wants me to live with them in Seoul so she can send me to Korea's top school. And then people will talk about what a great man her husband is for taking care of his step-son."

I let out a bitter chuckle. "It's all about their reputation. It always is."

Harabeoji smiled, but it wasn't the usual teasing one. It was the kind that held warmth, the kind that told me he understood more than I was saying. "But try once. For me."

That made me pause.

I stared at him for a long moment before finally sighing and shaking my head with a small smile. "Only for you, old man."

He chuckled. "That's my boy."

We both stood up, and he patted my back before leading the way toward my mother's room. I walked beside him, dragging my feet slightly, already regretting this decision.

As we neared her room, we saw that her door was wide open.

She was pacing angrily inside, muttering to herself while struggling to close a suitcase. She was complaining—about me, as expected.

"That boy never listens… Always does whatever he wants… Just like his father."

I clenched my jaw at that but said nothing.

The suitcase was refusing to close, no matter how hard she pushed down on it. She grew more frustrated, struggling to zip it up, her movements rough and impatient.

Then her phone rang.

She groaned before picking it up. Her tone immediately softened when she spoke. "Yeobo?"

Her husband.

The man she chose.

I took a silent step inside while she was distracted and, without a word, pressed the suitcase shut and zipped it closed. She didn't notice. Of course, she didn't.

Once done, I turned and walked out without saying a single word.

I didn't do it for her.

I did it so I wouldn't have to listen to her constant irritation over something as small as a suitcase.

Harabeoji followed me in just as I was leaving.

She ended the call with a sigh, running a hand through her hair in frustration.

Harabeoji spoke first, his tone calm but firm. "What are you doing?"

She turned, exhaling sharply. "I'm going back to Seoul. Ji-yoo won't understand. He refuses to listen to me."

He nodded slowly, watching her. "Don't force him to go."

Her expression hardened. "But, Appa—"

He cut her off with a pointed look. "Do you remember when you were getting married again? Your husband-to-be said you had to leave Ji-yoo behind, but you didn't want to because you loved him. Do you remember what I told you back then?"

She hesitated, her shoulders dropping slightly. Then, finally, she smiled—but it was a sad, nostalgic kind of smile. "I remember."

She glanced at the floor before looking back at him. "You told me not to worry about him. You told me I would always be there for him, and then you asked me to restart my life."

Harabeoji nodded. "That's right. And now, when he's so attached to me, you want to take him away?"

She sighed, closing her eyes for a moment before speaking. "I just… I just want him to have a good future."

"And you think I don't?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She immediately shook her head. "No, Appa, that's not what I meant."

"Then listen to me," he said gently. "He wants to live here. Don't force him. You know he craves love, and I am fulfilling that craving."

She remained silent, her hands clenching into fists before relaxing again.

Harabeoji continued, his voice softer now. "You're his mother. He wants your love too. But love isn't forceful. You can't make him stay with you just because you feel guilty. You left him once. Now, let him choose for himself."

I watched as my mother swallowed hard, her lips pressing into a thin line.

She looked at me.

For the first time in a long while, she really looked at me.

Not as a disappointment.

Not as a burden.

But as her son.

And that was when she finally exhaled in defeat.

"Fine," she whispered. "He can stay."

Harabeoji smiled proudly, and I stayed still, my heart unexpectedly twisting at the way she was looking at me now.

Like she finally saw me.

Like she finally understood.

For the first time in a long time, my mother and I stood in the same room without yelling at each other.

And maybe—just maybe—that was enough.

She sighed, crossing her arms as she looked at me. "Fine, you can stay here."

I blinked. "Really?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, really. But—" she pointed a sharp finger at me, "don't cause trouble for Appa. He already has enough to deal with. And stop acting like some rebellious street kid. You should focus on your studies instead of... whatever it is you do all day."

I smirked. "Whatever it is I do all day? You mean breathing?"

She huffed. "Don't get smart with me, Ji-yoo."

I held up my hands in mock surrender. "I wouldn't dare."

She sighed again, rubbing her temple like she always did when she was frustrated. "Just… don't make me regret this decision, okay? And don't think this means you can do whatever you want. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"From Seoul?" I raised an eyebrow.

She shot me a look. "Don't test me."

I chuckled under my breath, and for a brief second, I swore I saw a ghost of a smile on her lips. But she shook her head and straightened her coat.

"Alright, I'm leaving. Take care of yourself, Ji-yoo."

I didn't respond right away.

She looked at me for a second longer, then turned to my grandfather. "Appa, make sure he eats properly. And don't let him stay out too late."

Harabeoji smiled. "Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

She nodded, then turned back to me one last time.

"Goodbye, Ji-yoo."

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and gave a small nod. "Yeah. Bye, Umma."

She hesitated for a second, then finally walked away.

I didn’t watch her go.

I just stood there, listening to the sound of her heels clicking against the floor until the door shut behind her.

And then, she was gone.

Harabeoji looked at me with a teasing smirk. "So, what’s your plan for today, young man?"

I shrugged, leaning against the doorway. "Nothing much. Just a game of chess with Joon-ho."

He nodded, and I already knew exactly what was coming next.

"Alright, go enjoy. But when you come back, you have to play a game with me as well."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Okay, okay. But Harabeoji… you're an old man now. I’d feel bad making you lose."

He scoffed, standing up a little straighter. "Old man? Yah, do you know who you’re talking to? I was the chess champion of my university, boy. You think you can defeat me that easily?"

I smirked. "That was, what? Fifty years ago?"

He placed a dramatic hand over his heart. "Aish, the disrespect! This is why kids these days have no manners."

I laughed, and he shook his head, chuckling. "You'll see, Ji-yoo. If you think Joon-ho is a challenge, just wait until you sit across the board from me. I'll make you regret those words."

I raised my hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. We'll see who regrets what when I checkmate you in five moves."

He huffed. "We'll see. But for now, go. Have fun. Just don't come back crying when Joon-ho beats you."

I smirked, grabbing my jacket. "Not happening, old man."

He chuckled as I walked out, shaking his head. "Yah, stop calling me old man! I'm still young at heart!"

I laughed as I stepped out of the mansion, already feeling lighter.

I started my bike, the engine roaring to life beneath me. The thrill of speed always made my blood rush, drowning out every annoying thought in my head. As I took off, I pushed the throttle, my bike slicing through the empty morning streets like a bullet.

The wind whipped against my face as I leaned into a turn, my knee nearly grazing the pavement before I straightened up again. I smirked to myself. A sharp turn ahead—I took it without slowing down, the tires screeching slightly but holding firm. With a quick flick of my wrist, I popped the front wheel up into a wheelie, keeping it steady before slamming it back down with a smooth landing.

Racing through the city, I maneuvered between cars, feeling the adrenaline surge through me. The thrill, the danger—this was

what made me feel alive. I skidded to a stop just outside a small convenience store, the tires screeching before coming to a perfect halt.

Joon-ho was already there, leaning casually against his own bike, arms crossed, watching me with a smirk.

"Seriously, man?" he scoffed. "One day, you're gonna break all your bones doing that crap."

I swung my leg off the bike, stretching. "Please, I could do that in my sleep."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. And one day, you're gonna wake up in a hospital, wondering why you have metal plates in your body."

I smirked, shoving my hands into my pockets. "At least it'll be a cool story."

Joon-ho shook his head. "You're insane."

I grinned. "And you're boring."

He scoffed but didn't argue. I glanced at the store. "You buying something?"

"Yeah, just a drink. What about you?"

I shrugged. "Nothing from here. I didn't eat breakfast, and now I feel like eating from a hotel."

Joon-ho raised an eyebrow. "A hotel? Damn, someone's feeling fancy today."

I smirked. "I'm in the mood. Let’s go."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Fine, but you're paying."

I rolled my eyes. "Dream on, loser."

Laughing, we hopped onto our bikes and sped off toward a good hotel for breakfast, the thrill of the ride already making the morning feel better.

The sun hung lazily in the sky, casting a warm glow over the streets. It was Sunday—the only day I didn't have to deal with school, teachers, or annoying responsibilities. Just me, my bike, and whatever plans I wanted to make.

After breakfast, Joon-ho and I rode around for a bit, killing time before our chess match. I could tell he wasn't taking it seriously, but I was ready to crush him.

We finally reached a quiet spot, a small, dimly lit game café where people came to play board games, drink, and hang out. We took a corner table, set up the chessboard, and stared each other down like two warriors preparing for battle.

Joon-ho smirked. "You sure you wanna do this, dude? You might cry after losing."

I rolled my eyes. "Tch. Less talking, more playing."

He played white, moving his pawn forward. I responded without hesitation, my fingers steady as I placed my pieces strategically.

The first few moves were simple, setting up defenses, but soon, we started playing aggressively. Joon-ho, as expected, got too confident too fast. He tried a risky move, sending his knight deep into my territory.

I smirked. "You're walking right into a trap, idiot."

"What trap? I’m about to wipe you out." He scoffed, moving his queen forward.

I leaned back, stretching. "Yeah? Let’s see about that."

Two moves later, his queen was gone.

"What the hell?! No way!" Joon-ho groaned, staring at the board in disbelief.

I grinned. "Told you. You play like a kid."

He scratched his head, looking frustrated but still determined. The game stretched on, his defenses slowly crumbling as I cornered his king.

A few more moves, and it was checkmate.

"Boom. Done." I leaned back, smirking.

Joon-ho stared at the board, dumbfounded. "No. Freaking. Way."

"Way." I grinned wider. "Now, time for your punishment."

Joon-ho groaned, rubbing his face. "Man, I hate you."

"Yeah, yeah, quit whining. You knew the rules."

His punishment was simple: he had to buy drinks and say whatever embarrassing thing I wanted.

We left the café and went to a quiet spot near the riverbank, grabbing a few bottles of soju. The city lights reflected beautifully on the water, a perfect place to chill.

Joon-ho sighed, opening a bottle. "I don’t even know why I agreed to this."

"Because you’re a dumbass." I took a sip of my soju, enjoying the slight burn.

He grumbled something under his breath before suddenly clearing his throat. Then, in an exaggerated, dramatic voice, he blurted out:

"I, Joon-ho, am officially the worst chess player in all of Velmora. And Ji-yoo is a god among men."

I burst out laughing. "Damn right."

He groaned, downing his drink. "I swear, next time, I’m winning."

I smirked. "Keep dreaming, loser."

The night continued with more drinks, laughter, and mindless banter. The weight from the morning had faded. At least for now, things felt right.

By the time I got back home, it was already 11:35 PM. The streets were quiet, the cold air brushing against my face as I parked my bike outside the old mansion. The night had been long—since morning, I had been out with Joon-ho, and now, all I wanted was to crash on my bed.

I walked inside, expecting the house to be silent, but as soon as I stepped in, I noticed a dim light coming from the living room. Grandfather was still awake, sitting on the couch.

He looked up as I entered, raising an eyebrow. "Back home this late? Must've been a hell of a match."

I smirked, stepping closer. "Of course. I always win."

He chuckled. "That so? Then, I hope you didn't forget your promise."

I froze for a second, then let out a small sigh. "Ah, about that..."

He pointed at the chessboard already set up on the coffee table. "Come on, young man. Let's see if you're as good as you say you are."

I dropped onto the couch across from him, stretching my arms. "Fine, fine. But just so you know, I've been playing all day. Don't expect me to go easy on you."

"Oh? So you admit you were going easy on Joon-ho?" he teased, moving his first piece.

I grinned. "I didn't say that."

We played in silence at first, the only sounds being the ticking of the old clock on the wall and the soft clatter of chess pieces. Grandfather was sharp—his strategy was completely different from Joon-ho's reckless moves. He was patient, reading my every move carefully, waiting for the right moment to strike.

At first, I was doing fine. I took some of his pawns and managed to put pressure on his defenses. But then, he flipped the game.

He moved his bishop forward.

I frowned. Something about that move felt off.

I glanced at the board again, then moved my knight to counter him. "Nice try, old man."

He chuckled. "Oh, really?"

The moment I made my move, he pushed his queen forward.

"Check."

I blinked.

Wait, what?!

I stared at the board, trying to figure out where I had messed up. I still had pieces left, but my position was weak. I moved my king to the side, thinking I had avoided the worst.

Grandfather leaned back, smiling. Then, in three moves, he trapped my king.

"Checkmate."

I stared at the board in disbelief. "No way."

Grandfather chuckled. "Way."

I rubbed my face, still processing the loss. Then, I crossed my arms and smirked. "I let you win."

He burst out laughing. "Oh? That’s the excuse you’re going with?"

I nodded, keeping a straight face. "Of course. You're old. I didn’t want to hurt your pride."

He shook his head, amused. "Ah, I see. So, I guess all those times you were sweating weren’t because you were actually struggling?"

I scoffed. "Struggling? Pfft. I was just... keeping things interesting."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Ji-yoo, it's okay to lose sometimes, you know."

I huffed, leaning back into the couch. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I was just tired."

Grandfather laughed again, standing up and patting my head like I was a little kid. "Excuses, excuses."

I swatted his hand away, but I was smiling. Despite losing, it felt... nice. Comfortable.

As he started putting the pieces back in the box, he said, "Alright, young man. It's late. Go get some sleep."

I yawned, realizing just how exhausted I actually was. "Yeah, yeah, I'm going."

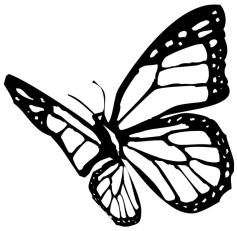
He smiled. "Good. And next time, no excuses when I beat you again."

I smirked. "Next time, I won't go easy on you, old man."

He chuckled. "We'll see."

With that, I got up, stretched, and headed to my room, still grumbling about how I had *totally* let him win. But deep down, I didn't really mind losing. Because, for once, losing felt... kind of nice

Chapter 13: Lee Gyeong Hu



Lee Gyeong-hu's POV

Unlike Ji-yoo, my Sunday wasn't exciting at all. I didn't go out, didn't do anything fun—I just sat at home, either studying or staring at the walls.

It was boring. Really boring.

And… I won't lie. I was missing Ji-yoo.

No, no, don't get me wrong. It's not like I *like* him or anything. I mean, why would I? He's reckless, rude, and doesn't follow any rules. He's the exact opposite of me.

But then again… maybe, *just maybe*, I *do* feel something.

Ugh. Whatever. I shook my head, trying to push away those thoughts. And just like that, my Sunday ended—boring and confusing.

I woke up to the sound of my alarm ringing in my ears. With a sigh, I got up, stretched, and changed into my school uniform.

Instead of doing something nice with my hair, I went for two braids.

Yeah, I know. Worst choice ever. But it was 1999, and back then, this was just how I was.

After getting ready, I walked downstairs.

The house was quiet—Mother wasn't home. As always, she was out for work. I wasn't surprised. I had gotten used to this a long time ago.

I quickly ate breakfast, then stepped outside, where the driver was already waiting for me. He opened the car door, and I slid in.

As the car started moving, I stared out the window, watching the city pass by.

A new school week was starting.

And for some reason… I had a feeling today was going to be different.

Lost in my thoughts, I walked into the school building, my mind still tangled in the thoughts of Kim Ji-yoo.

Why was I even thinking about him?

I sighed and shook my head, trying to snap out of it, when—

Thud!

I bumped into someone. Hard.

I stumbled back, blinking in surprise. I looked up, ready to apologize—and of course, it had to be him.

Kim Ji-yoo.

His hands were shoved in his pockets, his uniform as messy as ever, and that same annoying, cocky smirk was on his face.

"Seriously? Are you blind?" he scoffed, looking down at me.

I frowned, crossing my arms. "Excuse me? You were the one standing in the middle of the hallway like an idiot."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Tsk, tsk. The class president blaming others for her mistakes? That's new."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, please. You should be honored that I even bumped into you."

Ji-yoo raised an eyebrow. "Honored? What, do you think you're some kind of goddess?"

I smirked. "Well, at least I don't look homeless like you."

He placed a hand over his chest dramatically. "Ouch. That hurt, nerd."

I scoffed. "Good. Now move."

I tried to walk past him, but he stepped in front of me. "Wait, wait. One more thing."

I sighed. "What now?"

He tilted his head, eyeing my braids. His smirk grew wider. "What's up with the two ponytails? Are you five?"

I gasped, glaring at him. "They're called braids, you idiot."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Whatever. You look like a lost kindergarten kid."

I clenched my fists, resisting the urge to punch him. "At least I know how to dress properly. Unlike *someone* who thinks wearing a uniform correctly is a crime."

He just shrugged. "What can I say? Rules are boring."

I huffed, pushing past him. "So are you."

As I walked away, I heard him laughing behind me. "See you later, nerd."

I didn't bother responding. Annoying jerk.

But for some reason, I found myself smiling just a little.

I walked into my class and took my seat, exhaling slowly. What was that?

That moment in the hallway—it was nothing, right? Just a stupid little argument with Kim Ji-yoo.

Then why was my heart still racing?

I pulled my books out and, out of habit, glanced toward the doorway.

And there he was.

Standing outside my class, leaning casually against the wall, looking right at me.

His gray eyes held a glint of amusement, and that same annoying, cocky smirk was on his lips.

For a second, I just stared.

And then, I smiled.

I wasn't even thinking—just reacting. Holding his gaze, lost in the moment.

Unaware that someone else was watching.

Choi Min-jun.

I didn't notice him at first, but when I shifted slightly, I caught him looking at me with an unreadable expression.

Almost as if he knew something I didn't.

But I ignored it.

Because I didn't know.

I didn't know about the bet.

I didn't know that somewhere in his group, they were waiting—watching—hoping to win the challenge of making me fall in love.

But here's the thing…

Love in the 90s was different.

It wasn't about texts or video calls or social media posts.

It was about moments.

A single look. A fleeting glance. The rare, stolen seconds where you got to see someone you cared about.

And with my strict mother, I didn't get many chances to see him.

So maybe that's why…

Every time I did, I fell harder.

Harder than I ever thought possible.

Harder than the school bell ringing, pulling me back to reality.

The class started, and Ji-yoo finally left.

Did he go to his own class? Or did he bunk again?

I had no idea.

I shook my head and focused on my desk. Enough distractions.

Today was my science test.

And as always, I gave it my best.

And as always… I topped.

Again.

After the science test, English class dragged on like a never-ending story.

I stared at my textbook, but my mind was somewhere else.

No, not somewhere. With someone.

I tapped my pen against the desk, glancing at the clock. Still so much time left.

Then came math class. Normally, I liked numbers. They made sense—more than people did. But today, even math couldn't hold my attention.

The equations blurred together, my fingers tightening around my pen.

When will lunch break start?

I was restless, my heart beating just a little faster than usual.

Because the moment the bell rang…

I'd get to see him.

Kids in 2025 will never understand this feeling.

This kind of anxiety.

Everyone in this generation talks about depression, about anxiety. But they don't know—the people in love in the '90s felt an extreme level of anxiety too.

The kind that made your heart race before meeting someone you loved. The kind that made your hands sweat just thinking about what to say.

I wish we had smartphones back then.

If we did, I would have texted him—something, anything. Just to feel close to him.

But now, when I look back...

Those were the best days.

—

Finally, the lunch bell rang.

I almost jumped from my seat, quickly packing my things. The wait was over.

I stepped out of the classroom and walked toward the cafeteria. My heart pounded louder with each step, but I ignored it.

As I walked in, my eyes immediately found him.

Kim Ji-yoo.

He sat with his friend group—Joon-ho, Hye-jin, So-mi, Dong-hyun, and today… his girlfriend, Soo-ah.

I felt a little awkward. A little out of place.

So, I didn't bother them. I just walked past their table, heading toward an empty one.

But just as I was about to sit—

"Do I have to remind you always that you have to sit with us?"

I turned around.

Ji-yoo was looking at me, his gray eyes holding something unreadable.

I smiled. "You don't have to remind me. I just didn't want to disturb your little reunion."

He smirked, tilting his head slightly. "What reunion?"

I gestured toward Soo-ah with my eyes. "Your girlfriend. You should spend time with her."

Ji-yoo chuckled. "She's not a guest, she's always around. It's not a special occasion."

Soo-ah, who was sitting beside him, looked at me for a second and then turned back to her food, not saying anything.

Ji-yoo leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “So, are you coming or not?”

I hesitated. Why was he insisting?

Joon-ho, sitting beside him, grinned. “Just sit down, Gyeong-hu. Ji-yoo won’t let you eat in peace if you don’t.”

Hye-jin, too, nodded. “Yeah, he’ll probably stare at you from across the cafeteria until you give in.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled.

“Fine, fine. But I’m stealing your fries, Ji-yoo.”

He smirked. “Tch. Like I’d let you.”

And just like that, I sat with them—like I belonged there.

I took off my glasses, rubbing the lenses with the sleeve of my uniform. They were a little foggy, a little dirty.

As I was cleaning them, Hye-jin suddenly gasped.

“Wow, your eyes are beautiful! So this is what you were hiding under those glasses?”

I blinked. What?

Before I could respond, Ji-yoo leaned in slightly, tilting his head as if seeing me for the first time.

“Wow… she’s right.” His gray eyes held a look of curiosity. “I just realized your eyes are hazel. I never noticed before.”

A rush of warmth spread across my cheeks. I looked down, feeling a little shy.

“Thank you…” I mumbled.

But before I could put my glasses back on, So-mi grabbed my face with both hands, examining me.

What the—what was she doing?!

She hummed, tilting my head side to side. “Hmm…”

Joon-ho chuckled. “So-mi, don’t tell me you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

So-mi smirked. “Oh, I am.”

Before I could even react, she grabbed my wrist and started dragging me.

“Wait—where are we going?!” I protested.

“To fix this injustice!” she declared.

I had no idea what she meant.

—

The girls’ washroom.

I stood in front of the mirror, completely lost as So-mi opened her bag and started pulling out a hairbrush, a small makeup pouch, and a few hair ties.

I raised a brow. “Do you carry this stuff everywhere?”

She grinned. “Of course. A future stylist always has to be prepared.”

I blinked. “Wait… that’s what you want to be?”

She nodded, her eyes lighting up. “Yes! I want to be a professional stylist—hair, makeup, fashion, everything. My dream is to work with models, celebrities, and—who knows—maybe you one day.”

I scoffed. “Me? A model? That’s a funny thought.”

She smirked. “Let’s see if you’re still laughing when I’m done.”

—

First, she undid my braids, running her fingers through my hair to loosen them up.

“You have really pretty hair. Why do you always braid it so tightly?”

I shrugged. “It’s just easy that way.”

She clicked her tongue. “No, no, no. You need volume.”

She grabbed the brush and started styling my hair into soft waves, letting them fall naturally around my face.

Next, she took my glasses from my hand and set them aside.

“Wait, I need those—”

“Shh, trust me.”

She then pulled out a soft pink blush, dabbing it lightly on my cheeks.

“Smile.”

I hesitantly smiled, and she applied it with careful strokes.

Then, she opened a light pink lipstick.

“This will suit you perfectly.”

I watched in the mirror as she gently applied the color to my lips. It was subtle but... different.

—

When she finally stepped back, she placed her hands on her hips and grinned.

“Okay, now look at yourself.”

I turned to the mirror.

And I froze.

The girl staring back at me… wasn’t me.

She looked… beautiful.

Her hazel eyes stood out without the glasses, her lips had a soft, natural color, and her hair framed her face perfectly.

I touched my cheek, blinking in disbelief.

“This… this is me?”

So-mi smirked. “You tell me.”

I looked at So-mi, a little suspicious. “What now?”

She grinned mischievously. “Umm… wait. One last thing.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

Without answering, she suddenly rolled up my skirt slightly, exposing more of my legs.

I gasped, quickly grabbing the hem. “What are you doing?!”

She smirked. “Trust me. You’ll look good.”

I stared at her, debating whether to fix it back, but… she was confident about this.

I sighed. “Fine. Whatever.”

She clapped her hands. “Okay, now you’re officially done. We can go out.”

Taking a deep breath, I followed her out of the girls’ washroom.

—

The hallway.

The moment we stepped out, everything slowed down.

The air shifted.

I felt eyes on me.

First, the boys.

Some of them were leaning against lockers, chatting, or just passing by—until they weren’t.

Their heads turned, eyes lingering on me a second too long.

One guy nudged his friend, whispering something. Another blinked, his brows lifting in surprise.

I heard someone mutter, “Wait… is that Lee Gyeong-hu?”

And then came the girls.

Unlike the boys, they weren’t staring in admiration—they were trying to figure out what the hell was happening.

Their eyes flicked between me and the guys, trying to understand why they were looking at me like that.

One girl tilted her head. “Since when did she look like that?”

Another scoffed. “It’s just makeup.”

Jealousy. Confusion. Curiosity.

It was all mixed in the air.

And then, we reached the cafeteria.

—

Cafeteria entrance.

I spotted Ji-yoo and his group immediately.

They were at their usual table, laughing and talking, but then… his gaze lifted.

The second his deep gray eyes met mine—he froze.

The easygoing smirk he usually wore faltered. His expression changed.

It wasn't just him.

Joon-ho almost choked on his drink.

Hye-jin's jaw dropped.

Dong-hyun blinked repeatedly as if he wasn't sure he was seeing correctly.

And then… there was Soo-ah.

Ji-yoo's girlfriend.

She glanced between him and me, her face immediately darkening.

I swallowed. Okay, this was awkward.

Before I could react, Ji-yoo suddenly smirked again, tilting his head.

"Well, well, well… What do we have here?"

I rolled my eyes, but my face felt warm.

Ji-yoo walked toward me, his usual confident stride carrying a sense of purpose. His deep gray eyes scanned me from head to toe, and the way he looked at me… it sent a chill down my spine.

Meanwhile, his girlfriend, Soo-ah, looked like she had just swallowed a whole green chili by mistake. Her lips pressed into a thin line, her fingers tightening around her tray. Then, she looked away.

Ji-yoo finally stopped in front of me and turned to So-mi.

"So-mi… great work. Impressive."

So-mi, looking pleased with herself, grinned. "Thanks, Ji-yoo, but she's naturally beautiful."

Ji-yoo's gaze returned to me, lingering.

"Yeah… I can see that beauty."

His tone. His smirk. The way he said it.

I felt my face heat up.

Soo-ah, who had been silently fuming, scoffed.

"It's just makeup. Nothing so surprising."

So-mi turned to her, her smirk growing.

"No, Soo-ah. I only applied blush and lipstick. She's naturally beautiful."

Soo-ah rolled her eyes, clearly uninterested in hearing any of that.

Before I could say anything, Joon-ho leaned forward, dramatically placing his hand on his chest as if he had been struck by something.

"She has killer eyes, skin like snow, eyes like sunshine, and hair like a soft breeze."

Ji-yoo chuckled, clearly entertained.

"And that is why I call her princess. Right, princess?"

His teasing tone made my heart skip a beat.

Feeling a little shy, I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and whispered, "Thank you, Joon-ho, So-mi—"

But Ji-yoo cut me off.

"And me, princess?"

I tilted my head, meeting his gaze, and smiled softly.

"You too, Ji-yoo."

His smirk widened.

Just then, Dong-hyun joined in, grinning.

"Damn, Gyeong-hu. I think you just became the prettiest girl in the whole school. No wonder Ji-yoo calls you princess."

Hye-jin nodded enthusiastically.

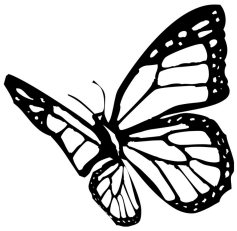
"I agree. You always looked cute, but now? You look like the main lead of a romance movie."

I felt a rush of warmth, happiness… and something else.

I wasn’t used to this kind of attention. But as Ji-yoo kept looking at me—like I was something rare, something worth admiring—I felt a strange kind of thrill.

Maybe this feeling wasn’t so bad after all.

Chapter 14: Lee Gyeong Hu



The lunch break ended, and I sighed, standing up.

Joon-ho stretched his arms dramatically and sighed in an exaggerated, flirtatious tone.

“Ahhh, now how will I see this view?”

I rolled my eyes, but So-mi, ever the troublemaker, glanced at Soo-ah, who was looking away, fuming in jealousy.

She smirked. “Well, I really think Gyeong-hu should go back to her class. Otherwise, someone’s evil eye might get to our princess.”

Hye-jin suddenly frowned, sniffing the air. “Hey, guys… do you smell something burning?”

I instinctively took a breath, but I didn’t notice anything strange.

Before I could even respond, Dong-hyun pointed straight at Soo-ah, who was still looking away, her fists clenched.

“Yeah, I can smell it too.”

The realization hit me, and I chuckled softly.

Just as I did, Ji-yoo leaned in close, his breath warm against my ear.

"You're chuckling at my girlfriend because she's jealous of you, huh, princess?"

His voice was low, teasing… seductive.

Before I could react, before anyone else could notice, he moved back like nothing had happened.

A rush of heat filled my face.

"Umm… ah… ok, guys, so umm… I think I should go now."

I turned quickly, trying to escape before my face betrayed me any further.

But then—

"Princess."

Ji-yoo's voice stopped me in my tracks.

I turned to see him, smirking.

The whole group was looking at us.

"Let’s go on a bunk tomorrow."

My eyes widened. Bunking? Me?

Before I could protest, everyone jumped in.

"Yes! Let’s do it!" Hye-jin clapped her hands together excitedly.

"Come on, you never bunk. You need to live a little, Gyeong-hu," Dong-hyun added, grinning.

"It'll be fun! One day won't kill you," So-mi said, winking at me.

I opened my mouth to refuse, but Joon-ho grabbed his chest dramatically. "Please, princess! One day! Let us see this new version of you outside the school too!"

I sighed, shaking my head, but Ji-yoo was watching me closely.

He leaned against the table, tilting his head. "Just say yes, princess. It's just a movie."

I bit my lip. A movie… bunking… with them?

Something inside me whispered—
Just say yes.

I exhaled slowly. "…Okay."

Cheers erupted around me.

"It's decided! We're going to a movie tomorrow!" So-mi grinned.

Ji-yoo smirked at me again. "Good girl."

When Ji-yoo called me "Good girl," I swear—

My soul left my body.

For a moment, I just stood there, frozen, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Did… did he just—?

I took a deep breath, forcing my lips into a small smile like it wasn't affecting me. Like I wasn't about to combust right then and there.

Without another word, I turned around and walked away, keeping my pace steady, controlled.

But inside?

Pure chaos.

I entered my classroom, trying to shake off the way Ji-yoo's voice replayed in my head on a loop.

"Good girl."

Stop thinking about it!

But the moment I stepped in—

Silence.

Like a spell had been cast, the entire class turned to look at me.

Some students froze mid-conversation. Others had their eyes practically bulging out of their heads.

I blinked. What? What's wrong with them?

Then I remembered.

Oh.

The new hairstyle.

The no glasses.

The rolled-up skirt.

Shit.

Choi Min-jun, who usually sat a row behind me, leaned forward, his jaw practically on the floor.

"Y-You…" he stammered, squinting like his eyes were deceiving him. "What happened to you?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

A girl from the front row, Se-ri, gasped dramatically. "Did you finally fall in love?! Is that why you changed?"

Another voice whispered from the back. "No way… she actually looks… kinda hot?"

Someone else muttered, "I thought she was just a nerd, but… damn."

I felt my face heat up. Why were they making a big deal out of this?

Another classmate, Eun-seok, whistled lowly. "I swear if I had known she looked like this without glasses, I would've—"

I shot him a glare, and he immediately shut up.

I sighed, making my way to my seat, ignoring the whispers and side-eyes.

Why was everyone acting like I had turned into a different person overnight?

I was still me.

Right?

As I sat in class, my eyes focused on the words in my textbook, I realized something—

My eyesight was weak.

Not too weak, but enough that I needed my glasses for reading.

I sighed and slid them back on, letting the world sharpen again.

But I won't lie—I had never seen myself the way I did today.

For the first time, I looked in the mirror and saw a different version of me. A version that felt new, unfamiliar—yet strangely beautiful.

I wouldn't say I was Miss Korea or anything, but…

Maybe I wasn't just an ordinary nerd either.

When school finally ended, I took my glasses off again before stepping outside.

The driver was already waiting for me near the car.

The moment I approached, he looked at me once—then twice.

His brows furrowed like he was seeing a ghost.

Maybe he thought I had gotten plastic surgery during school hours.

Or maybe he wasn't even sure if I was the same girl he had dropped off this morning.

He didn't say anything, just opened the car door for me.

I climbed in, settling into my seat—

And then I froze.

To my right, sitting elegantly with her arms crossed, was my mother.

She had come to pick me up.

My heart skipped a beat.

“M-Mother?” I whispered.

She turned to me, her sharp eyes scanning my face.

Then, to my surprise—

She reached out.

Her fingers gently touched my hair, my cheeks… like she was trying to confirm something.

“You…” she murmured, almost to herself.

I stiffened. Was she angry? Was she about to scold me for changing my appearance?

I swallowed nervously. “I-I’m sorry, Mother. My friend So-mi… she just wanted me to feel good, so she styled me. She said I should take off my glasses just for a bit—”

She cut me off with a small chuckle.

A… chuckle?

She tilted her head, looking at me as if seeing me for the first time.

“You look beautiful.”

I blinked. Did I hear that right?

My mother… just complimented me?

And not about my studies?

She smiled, a rare warmth flickering in her expression.

“You look like me when I was your age.”

I stared at her in shock.

“I always dressed like this too, Gyeong-hu. You…” she hesitated, her voice softening. “You’re my reflection.”

Something warm bloomed in my chest.

It was such a simple moment—just a few words.

But for the first time, my mother saw me.

Not as a top student.

Not as an obedient daughter.

She saw me.

And it made me feel happier than I could ever put into words.

She continued to look at me with a soft expression, something I wasn’t used to seeing.

Then, she smiled.

“It’s nice to see you like this, Gyeong-hu.”

My heart skipped a beat.

Was she really saying this? My mother—the woman who always focused on my studies, my discipline, my future—was appreciating something about me that wasn't academic?

I looked at her, my lips curling into a small smile. "Thank you, Mother."

She nodded, then leaned back against the seat.

For the first time, there was no pressure, no strictness—just a comfortable silence between us.

—

When we reached home, I changed into more comfortable clothes before joining my mother for lunch.

The dining table was quiet except for the occasional clinking of chopsticks against the bowls.

After a few minutes, she spoke.

"How was your test?"

I knew she would ask eventually.

I swallowed my bite of food and nodded. "I topped again."

She paused for a moment before giving a satisfied nod.

"Good. I expected nothing less."

That was my mother—always expecting excellence.

But today, for the first time, she had noticed something about me beyond my grades.

And that made today feel a little more special.

After lunch, I went up to my room, still feeling the warmth of my mother's words. It was rare for her to acknowledge anything outside of my studies, and today… today had been different.

I sat on my bed and picked up the cordless phone from my bedside table. Without wasting a second, I dialed my father's number.

The line rang twice before I heard his familiar voice.

"My princess."

A wide smile spread across my face. "Father!"

"I was just about to call you. How was your day, my smart girl? Another test, I assume?" He chuckled lightly.

I leaned back against my pillows, my heart full of excitement. "It was amazing, Father! And yes, I topped my science test again."

"Of course, you did," he said proudly. "I knew my daughter would be number one. But wait—why do you sound so happy today? There's something else, isn't there?"

I bit my lip, unable to contain my excitement. "Yes! You won't believe it, but today… Mother complimented me."

There was a pause on the other end, as if he was processing my words. "Your mother? Complimented you?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "Yes! She told me I looked beautiful."

"Really?" His voice softened. "That's wonderful, my princess. I know how much you've always wanted her to notice you beyond your studies."

I sighed, gripping the phone tighter. "It felt… different. She even said I looked like her when she was my age. And for the first time, I felt like she was seeing me—not just as a student, but as her daughter."

He exhaled slowly, and I could tell he was smiling. "That's because you are her daughter, Gyeong-hu. No matter how strict she is, she loves you. Maybe today, she just realized she doesn't say it enough."

I felt warmth spread through my chest. "I hope so."

There was a moment of silence before he spoke again.

"So, tell me… What else happened today?"

And just like that, I began telling him everything. From So-mi's little makeover session in the restroom to Ji-yoo's teasing, and even the way Joon-ho dramatically called me beautiful in front of everyone.

My father chuckled. "It sounds like you had quite the day, my princess."

"I did," I admitted, still smiling.

"And what about that boy… Ji-yoo, was it?" His tone was playful. "You mentioned his name quite a lot just now."

I felt my face heat up. “Father!”

He laughed. “I’m just saying… you sound happier than usual.”

I sighed, shaking my head. “He’s just… he’s annoying.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

I could tell he didn’t believe me.

“Anyway!” I changed the topic quickly. “I missed you today.”

His voice turned gentle. “I missed you too, princess. You know I’m always here, right? No matter where I am.”

I nodded, my heart feeling lighter. “I know.”

We talked a little longer before he finally told me to get some rest.

“You’ve had an exciting day. Sleep well, my princess.”

“Goodnight, Father.”

I placed the phone back on its charger, still smiling from my conversation with Father. Even though he lived abroad with his wife, he always made time for me. I had met her once—she was sweet and beautiful. I could tell she made my father happy, and for that, I was grateful.

I glanced out the window. It was still bright outside, around 5:00 PM in Korea, but on his side of the world, it was already night.

With a deep breath, I turned back to my desk, determined to focus on my studies. I opened my textbooks and started

reviewing the day's lessons. But no matter how hard I tried, my mind kept drifting to something else…

Tomorrow.

The bunk with Ji-yoo and the whole group.

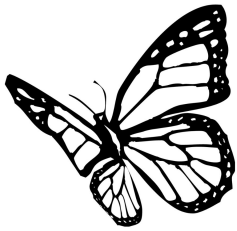
A small, excited smile crept onto my lips.

Would it really happen? Would I actually skip school for the first time?

I tapped my pencil against my notebook, unable to stop the anticipation from bubbling up inside me.

This was going to be interesting

Chapter 15: Lee Gyeong Hu



I woke up earlier than usual. How could I sleep when my heart was pounding like a drum, restless with anticipation?

The room was still wrapped in the lingering shadows of dawn, but I could feel the excitement humming through my veins. With a deep breath, I threw off my covers and stepped onto the cold wooden floor, feeling the contrast of warmth from my bed and the chill of the morning air.

I unbuttoned my nightwear slowly, the fabric slipping down my shoulders, pooling at my feet like whispered secrets. The mirror on my vanity reflected my silhouette, my bare skin kissed by the dim, bluish morning light filtering through the curtains. I ran my fingers through my hair, messy and tangled from sleep, before stepping into the bathroom.

The moment I turned on the shower, steam began to rise, curling around me like ghostly arms, caressing my skin with its warmth. I stepped beneath the cascade of water, tilting my head back, letting it drench me completely. The sensation was intoxicating—the way the hot water slid down my body, washing away the remnants of sleep, waking up something deep inside me.

And then, I began to sing.

My voice blended with the rhythm of the falling water, echoing off the tiled walls. There was something about singing under the shower—about the way the sound filled the small space, about how free it made me feel. My body moved along with the melody, my bare skin slick with water as I swayed to the song only my heart knew.

My hands slid down my body as I reached for the soap, the scent of jasmine and vanilla filling the air as I lathered my skin. Soft foam covered me, tracing the curves of my body, slipping down my legs in delicate trails. I took my time, letting my fingers glide over every inch, feeling the silkiness of my skin beneath the bubbles.

Afterward, I reached for the razor, running it carefully over the sensitive areas, making sure every inch of me was smooth and flawless. The slight sting of cold water rinsing over freshly shaved skin made me shiver, but I relished the sensation.

Lastly, I massaged shampoo into my scalp, the scent of fresh lavender filling my lungs, calming yet exhilarating. I let the lather spread through my strands before washing it all away, feeling the weight of water pressing my hair against my back.

I stood beneath the showerhead one last time, letting the hot water cleanse every last trace of soap and fatigue. My skin glowed, soft and flushed, my muscles relaxed from the heat.

Stepping out of the shower, I grabbed a towel, wrapping it securely around my body. The mirror was fogged up, but I could still see the vague outline of my reflection. For a brief moment, I traced my fingers over the glass, clearing away the mist to reveal

my face. My hazel eyes stared back at me, shining with something I hadn't seen in a long time—excitement.

I dried my body with slow, deliberate movements, relishing the warmth that still lingered on my skin. Then, with the anticipation still pulsing through me, I walked over to my closet and slipped into my school uniform.

The crisp white blouse hugged my figure, the skirt falling just above my knees. I ran my fingers through my damp hair, letting it air-dry in soft waves.

Looking at myself in the mirror once more, I let a smirk tug at my lips.

Today was going to be different.

Today, I wasn't just Lee Gyeong-hu, the obedient class president.

Today, I was stepping into the unknown—and I couldn't wait.

I stood in front of the mirror, tilting my head slightly as I examined my reflection. Not bad, Gyeong-hu.

I reached for the hem of my skirt and folded it up a little—not too much, just enough to give it the same rebellious yet elegant touch that So-mi had done yesterday. The fabric felt lighter, brushing against my thighs in a way that made me feel different… not just a studious nerd, but something more.

My hair.

I ran my fingers through the damp strands, debating. Two braids? No. A ponytail? No.

I wasn’t going to look like a nerd today—not when I was about to go on a bunk with Ji-yoo.

I smirked at my own reflection before deciding to leave my hair open, letting it fall naturally in soft waves around my shoulders.

Then, I reached for the pink lipstick So-mi had insisted on yesterday. I hesitated for a moment before applying just a little—not too bold, just enough to add a soft, fresh color to my lips. The blush came next, dusting my cheeks with a natural flush. Perfect.

I turned from side to side, checking myself. Something was missing.

"What am I forgetting?" I murmured to myself, tapping my chin.

Then, it hit me. My watch.

I reached for the small silver watch resting on my desk, its familiar weight comforting as I fastened it around my wrist. It was a gift from my father—a reminder of time, of patience, of everything I had been waiting for.

I exhaled, looking at my final reflection. This was me, but not just the old Gyeong-hu. This was someone stepping out of her comfort zone, stepping toward something new.

With one last glance in the mirror, I turned and left my room.

Downstairs, the scent of breakfast filled the air—warm, inviting. I sat at the table, picking up my chopsticks as the maid placed a bowl of rice and kimchi in front of me. I took small bites, eating quickly but savoring the warmth of the food.

My mother wasn't home yet—probably already busy with work. Maybe that was a good thing. I didn't want her questioning why I looked different today.

Once I finished, I grabbed my bag and stepped outside.

The driver was already waiting for me by the black sedan. He opened the door, but before I stepped in, I noticed him hesitating.

His gaze flickered to my skirt, then to my open hair, my lips slightly tinted pink, my fresh look.

He blinked once. Then twice.

I bit back a smile. Did he think I had done plastic surgery overnight?

He didn't say anything, just cleared his throat and nodded. I slid into the backseat, and he shut the door behind me before getting into the driver's seat.

As we pulled away from the house, I glanced out of the window, the city of Velmora coming to life under the golden morning sun.

The car slowed to a stop in front of Seonghwa Academy, the grand gates standing tall like silent guardians of all the secrets and stories unfolding within. The air was crisp, the morning sun barely rising over the rooftops, casting soft golden hues across the school grounds.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, adjusting my bag over my shoulder, I felt it—eyes on me. It wasn't unusual; after all, I had topped the science test again. But today… the stares weren't because of my academics.

It was because of me.

I walked through the crowd of students, feeling their hushed whispers following behind. Some girls exchanged quick glances, nudging each other as if trying to understand why I looked different. Boys who had never given me a second glance suddenly seemed intrigued.

I held my head high, pretending I didn't notice. Confidence, Gyeong-hu. You're not just a bookworm anymore.

Then, just before I reached the cafeteria where I knew my group would be, a familiar voice cut through the morning buzz.

"Tch. Someone sure changed overnight."

I didn't even have to look to know who it was.

So-ah.

I turned my head slightly, meeting the gaze of Ji-yoo's girlfriend as she leaned against the locker, arms crossed, her usual bored but irritated expression plastered on her face. Her perfectly styled hair, her expensive accessories, and the way she tapped her foot against the floor—everything about her screamed wealth and attitude.

She wasn't alone, of course. A few girls from her circle stood beside her, waiting for me to react.

I didn't.

Instead, I smiled lightly. "Good morning, So-ah."

Her eyes narrowed at my polite tone, but before she could respond, Ji-yoo's voice interrupted.

"Princess."

The moment that nickname left his lips, my heart skipped—no, stumbled.

I turned, and there he was.

Kim Ji-yoo, in all his infuriating yet effortless glory.

His gray eyes flickered with amusement as he leaned against a pillar, hands shoved into his pockets, his tie loosened in that signature rebellious way. Joon-ho, Dong-hyun, So-mi, and Hye-jin stood beside him, all smirking like they had been expecting this moment.

So-mi, as usual, beamed proudly at her masterpiece—me.

Ji-yoo's gaze raked over me slowly, deliberately. I could see the smirk tugging at his lips as if he had already won something.

"Not bad, princess," he mused, tilting his head slightly. "Almost didn't recognize you. Thought a new transfer student arrived overnight."

Joon-ho whistled. "Damn, Ji-yoo, I think you just lost your title as the most good-looking one in our group."

Dong-hyun chuckled. "She's giving main character energy today."

Hye-jin grinned. "I told you she was always pretty. Just needed a little push."

I rolled my eyes, trying to play it cool despite the sudden attention.

So-ah, however, wasn't as amused.

“Oh, please.” She scoffed, stepping closer to Ji-yoo and latching onto his arm, her eyes filled with irritation. “It’s just some makeup. Nothing special.”

So-mi, never one to let a comment slide, crossed her arms. “Correction: it’s barely any makeup. Just a little blush and lipstick. Unlike you, So-ah, not everyone needs layers to look good.”

The group laughed, and I bit back a smirk. So-ah’s face twisted in annoyance, but she quickly composed herself, flipping her hair.

Ji-yoo, however, was unbothered. His gaze was still on me, his usual teasing demeanor intact.

“So?” he asked, stepping closer. “Are you ready for our bunk, princess?”

I exhaled, glancing at the others.

Joon-ho was grinning like a kid planning mischief.

Hye-jin looked excited, clearly waiting for my answer.

Dong-hyun and So-mi were both nodding in encouragement.

And then there was Ji-yoo—his head tilted, his gray eyes unreadable, as if already knowing my answer.

I took a breath.

"Fine. Let’s do it."

Ji-yoo’s lips curled into a smirk.

"Good girl."

And just like that, my soul left my bod

As soon as I stepped through the gates of Seonghwa Academy, I felt it again—every eye on me. It was just like yesterday, but instead of feeling self-conscious, I felt something else. Pride. Confidence. A thrill that sent a rush of warmth through my chest. My glasses were tucked safely in my bag, and I didn't feel like I needed them—not today.

I spotted Ji-yoo leaning casually against a pillar near the cafeteria, hands in his pockets, his signature smirk playing on his lips. As soon as our eyes met, he straightened slightly.

"Hey, princess."

His voice was smooth, teasing, but there was something else in the way he said it—something I couldn't quite place.

Before I could respond, So-mi appeared beside me, her grin radiating pure satisfaction. She gestured at me dramatically and turned to the boys. "See? My masterpiece. Just being honest, if I got the chance, I'd make you my model."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Me? A model? No way."

"Why not?" So-mi placed her hands on her hips. "You've got the face, the presence, and now, the confidence. If I ever start my own agency, you're my first pick."

Ji-yoo leaned in slightly. "I agree."

I turned to look at him, arching a brow. "You do?"

He nodded, that smirk never leaving his lips. "You're already my princess, might as well be a queen too."

A warmth spread over my cheeks, but before I could reply, Dong-hyun clapped his hands together. "Alright, enough of this. Where are we going?"

"Velmora Mall?" Hye-jin suggested, adjusting the straps of her bag.

"Good choice," Joon-ho agreed. "Movies, shopping, food—everything we need in one place."

Just as we were all settling on the plan, a sharp scoff broke through our conversation.

So-ah.

She stood a few steps away, arms crossed, her expression unimpressed. "A mall? That's so basic."

I didn't say anything, but I could feel her gaze burning into me.

Ji-yoo turned to her lazily, "You got a better idea?"

She rolled her eyes. "I just don't see the point. Also, I won't be joining."

Silence.

No one argued.

No one begged her to reconsider.

She noticed.

Her lips parted slightly, as if she expected Ji-yoo—or anyone—to say something. But Ji-yoo just shrugged.

“Suit yourself.”

Her face twisted for a split second before she forced a scoff and flipped her hair. "Whatever." Without another word, she turned on her heel and walked away.

The second she was gone, So-mi let out a dramatic sigh of relief. “Thank god. I was worried we'd have to deal with her negative energy the whole time.”

Hye-jin smirked. “Looks like someone’s feeling insecure.”

I remained quiet, but the way Ji-yoo was looking at me—it was intense, almost like he was studying me.

Then, he tilted his head and grinned. "Ready, princess?"

I exhaled, smiled back, and nodded.

"Let’s go."

As soon as the first bell rang, signaling the start of the school day, we all exchanged glances, knowing none of us actually planned to sit through classes today. Today was different. Today was a thrill, a rush of adrenaline—a break from routine.

Ji-yoo stretched his arms and smirked. “Alright, let’s do this.”

So-mi clapped her hands together, “Operation Escape from Seonghwa Academy begins now.”

We waited until the second bell rang—the time when teachers were in their classrooms and students had already settled into

their seats. The hallways were empty. Perfect for slipping out unnoticed.

"So, how exactly are we sneaking out?" I asked, adjusting my bag.

Joon-ho grinned, "Leave that to me and Dong-hyun. We've been doing this for years."

Dong-hyun winked. "Trust us, we know all the exits."

Ji-yoo leaned in close, his voice dropping to a low, teasing whisper. "You scared, princess?"

I looked up at him, my heart doing a small flip. "Not at all."

His grin widened. "Good."

We moved quickly, slipping through the hallways, dodging the staff room, and making our way to the back gate. The chain lock was already loose—a trick Joon-ho had mastered a long time ago.

One by one, we slipped through. The moment my feet hit the pavement outside the school walls, a rush of excitement hit me. This was it.

Ji-yoo was the last one to step through. He turned back once, as if savoring the act of rebellion, then looked at me and smirked. "You're officially a rule-breaker now, princess."

I chuckled, "Guess I am."

Hye-jin sighed in relief, "Alright, where's the taxi? We don't want to waste time."

Dong-hyun pulled out his phone and called for a cab. Within minutes, a sleek black taxi pulled up in front of us. Ji-yoo opened the door, motioning for me to get in first. "Ladies first."

I slid inside, followed by So-mi and Hye-jin. The boys climbed in after us, filling the car with a mix of laughter, excitement, and the slight scent of Ji-yoo's cologne—something dark, something intoxicating.

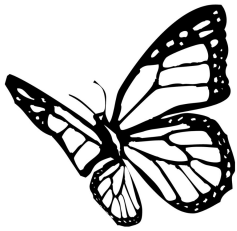
As the driver pulled away from Seonghwa Academy, I glanced out the window. The school was getting smaller, fading behind us.

I exhaled slowly.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't just the responsible, obedient Gyeong-hu.

I was free.

Chapter 16: Lee Gyeong Hu



The automatic doors of Velmora Mall whooshed open, and the warm scent of buttery popcorn, street food, and new clothes hit me all at once. The mall was buzzing—a Saturday glow hanging in the air, sunlight slicing through the glass ceiling above, painting everything golden.

I walked in, Ji-yoo beside me, his hands in his pockets, his black school bag hanging loose over one shoulder. His gaze flicked to me now and then—like I was something new, something he couldn’t stop looking at.

"Hey, Princess," he said casually, leaning toward me just a little, enough to brush shoulders.

So-mi walked on my other side, her glossy hair bouncing with every step. She beamed proudly like a stylist admiring her own model on the runway. "Just being honest, if I ever open a boutique, I swear you’re gonna be my model, Gyeong-hu."

I laughed, tugging at my skirt slightly. "Me? A model? No way."

From behind us, Joon-ho chimed in, raising a brow. "Actually, I can see it. But only if Ji-yoo doesn’t steal her first."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ji-yoo shot back, a grin playing on his lips.

Dong-hyun joined in, his voice light and teasing. "It means you're already acting like her bodyguard-boyfriend hybrid."

Hye-jin, walking just a little ahead with a juice box in hand, turned around, walking backwards to face us. Her dark hair swayed behind her. "Okay, lovebirds and fashionistas. Focus. What's the plan? We bunked, we're here—now what?"

Everyone paused in the middle of the walkway, surrounded by bright shop signs and the chatter of passersby.

"Velmora Mall's movie theater?" Dong-hyun offered, looking at the huge poster of a thriller film plastered across the glass wall.

"Ooo, I'm in!" Hye-jin raised her hand, sipping her drink. "As long as there's popcorn and a horror twist, count me."

"But first," So-mi twirled toward me, "we NEED to browse the fashion stores. Gyeong-hu's transformation isn't complete yet."

I laughed nervously. "There's more?"

"Always more," she winked.

Joon-ho groaned like he was in pain. "Why do girls always go for shopping first? There's an arcade, you know. A real one—with Street Fighter and Dance Dance Revolution."

"Let the boys go," Hye-jin said, linking arms with me and So-mi. "We'll meet them in an hour."

Ji-yoo's voice cut through the air, low and teasing.
"What if I don't want to leave my princess behind?"

I bit the inside of my cheek, hiding a shy smile. He always knew how to say something that made my whole body feel like it was made of sparks.

"Then tag along," So-mi said. "You can carry our shopping bags."

"I'd carry hers," he muttered under his breath, but loud enough for me to hear.

Inside the Boutique

While the boys eventually wandered off toward the arcade, we three girls stepped into a boutique. It had 90s vibes dripping from every hanger—chokers, crop tops, butterfly clips, plaid skirts, oversized denim jackets.

So-mi was on a mission. She picked out outfits and held them up to me, making dramatic gasps like we were in a runway montage.

"Okay, try this. And this! Ooo, this would KILL Ji-yoo on sight."

Hye-jin, more chill but just as fashionable, leaned against the wall, watching. "You know… I didn't expect you to come out of your shell like this, Gyeong-hu. It suits you. You're kinda mysterious in a good way."

"Thanks," I said, a little stunned. Compliments from Hye-jin were rare and real.

"And you've got those main character eyes," she added. "Soft, but dangerous if someone looks too long."

I blinked, then laughed. "What does that even mean?"

"It means Ji-yoo is screwed," she smirked.

Back With the Boys – Reunion

An hour later, we reunited near the movie theater on the third floor. The neon sign blinked above us, showing “The Silent Forest”—a thriller-horror that looked way too intense for me.

"You girls done turning Gyeong-hu into a supermodel?" Joon-ho teased.

"We tried," So-mi flipped her hair. "But she was already a masterpiece."

"You’re not wrong," Ji-yoo muttered, his eyes meeting mine.

I looked away, heart thudding in my chest.

"Let’s grab popcorn!" Dong-hyun said, leading the charge.

Hye-jin nudged me. "Stick with me if the movie gets scary. I scream but I don’t judge."

I smiled. "Deal."

And as we all headed into the theater, my steps were lighter than ever before. Because for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t just the class president. I wasn’t just the daughter with grades.

I was Gyeong-hu, surrounded by friends.

And I was finally living.

The theater was dim, the heavy velvet curtains drawn back, and that *classic crackle of film reels* began to echo through the surround system. The seats were plush red, the kind that squeaked slightly when you sat back.

We slid into the middle row—
Dong-hyun and Joon-ho racing ahead to grab the best spots.
So-mi, Hye-jin, and I took the seats just beside them.
And Ji-yoo—of course—took the one right beside me.

The lights dimmed, and the screen flickered to life.
"The Silent Forest" started slow, with haunting music and a little girl running through fog.

I wasn't ready for how eerie it would be.
The silence. The way the camera lingered.
And when the first jump scare hit—a figure appearing in the corner of a mirror—I literally gasped.

I felt a light pressure on my hand.
Ji-yoo.

He leaned over, voice barely above a whisper.
"Don't worry, Princess. If you get scared, you can hold on to me."

I turned to him, the light of the screen flickering across his face.
"I'm not scared," I whispered back.
My voice betrayed me.

He smirked, slowly returning his gaze to the screen, his fingers just barely brushing against mine on the armrest.

Meanwhile, So-mi was clutching Hye-jin's sleeve.
"WHY do I do this to myself? Remind me next time to watch a rom-com."

Hye-jin, cool as ever, calmly munched on popcorn.
"This is how I relax. Fear is fun when it's fiction."

From a few seats down, Joon-ho whispered something to Dong-hyun and both of them snickered—probably making bets on who would scream next.
Dong-hyun lost.
A crow flew into a window on screen and he *yelped* out loud, making the whole row laugh.

But somewhere around the middle of the movie, the plot thickened.
The little girl wasn't alone in the woods.
Whispers began echoing in the trees.
A shadow figure started following her—and every time she looked back, it froze, just staring.

I swallowed.
I didn't even realize I was gripping the armrest tight… until I felt Ji-yoo's fingers slip between mine.
He didn't say anything.
Just kept watching the screen, our hands quietly locked together in the dark.

I felt my heart thudding in my chest.
Not from fear.
But from something far more dangerous.

And then—
BOOM.

A tree collapsed on screen. The sound shook the whole theater.
The girl screamed.

So did So-mi.
"OH MY GOD—" she slapped Hye-jin's arm.
"I can't, I can't! I should've stayed in the boutique!"

"Shhh!" someone from the back hissed, but everyone was laughing now.

INTERVAL – The Lights Come On

The theater lights flickered on halfway, not too bright—just enough to remind us we were back in reality. The screen had gone dark, the tension of the movie still crawling under our skin like shadows that refused to leave.

So-mi stretched with a dramatic sigh. "That movie's intense, but not as intense as watching *you two* the whole time."
She winked at me.

Joon-ho smirked, shoving popcorn into his mouth. "Seriously, the horror was on screen but the real suspense was the eye contact between Ji-yoo and our princess."

Hye-jin added with a sly smile, "Forget the movie, I came for this live drama."

I chuckled softly, trying to hide the flush rising to my cheeks. "I'm going to the bathroom," I said quickly, grabbing my phone and standing.

"Don't fall in love with your reflection," Dong-hyun called after me.

I tossed a grin over my shoulder and walked away.

In the Hallway

I stepped out of the restroom a few minutes later, my fingers still slightly damp from the sink. The hallway was quieter now, empty… almost cinematic.

And then—
He appeared.

Ji-yoo, walking with that lazy, cocky stride, popcorn in one hand, soda in the other.

We turned the same corner.
Time collapsed.

Boom.

He collided into me, hard. The impact knocked the air out of my lungs.

Popcorn flew.
Soda splashed.
And the next second, I was on the floor—

With him on top of me.

His chest pressed against mine, his hips between my legs.
His hand, in the chaos, had landed firmly on my right breast.

His eyes widened—not with guilt—but with *realization*.

Time froze.

My heart thundered in my ears. My lips parted to breathe, but no air came.
I could feel every inch of him above me.
Warm. Heavy. Real.

His eyes locked on mine.

Not playful.
Not apologetic.

Just dark. Hungry. Possessive.

His fingers twitched where they rested.
And still, he didn't move.

Neither did I.

I should've pushed him off.
Should've said something.
But all I did was stare back—eyes caught, breath stolen.

"Princess…"
His voice was low, rough. Like gravel soaked in desire.

"You okay?" he whispered, but it wasn't out of concern.

It was a dare.
A challenge.
An unspoken "I know what I'm doing to you."

I swallowed hard, but said nothing. My body felt hot, too aware, too alive.
He leaned closer—his breath brushing my cheek.
One second more, and the world would've slipped away entirely.

Then—voices in the distance. The others.

Ji-yoo finally blinked and pulled away, slow… deliberate… like he didn't really want to.

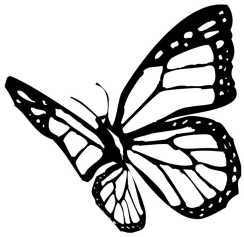
He stood, offering a hand. I took it, still dizzy, my legs trembling as he pulled me up.

Neither of us said anything.
But our eyes?

Our eyes had already spoken volumes.

And my pantie was wet Holy fuck……

Chapter 17: Lee Gyeong Hu / Kim Ji Yoo



The day's residue clung to me, thick with the scent of defiance and the echo of laughter. Ji-yoo, Joon-ho, Hye-jin, So-mi, and Dong-hyun faded as we slipped back into Seonghwa Academy's rigid embrace, just before the bell's sharp command. Freedom, a stolen, heady draught, was surrendered to the gilded cage of my life.

The car's plush leather was a silent return to my carefully constructed world. The streets blurred, mere scenery to the storm raging within. The day was done, neatly filed away, but something lingered, a phantom touch that refused to fade. Ji-yoo's hand, a fleeting, accidental brush against my breast, had seared itself onto my skin, a brand of unsettling awareness.

Now, lying on my bed, the soft fabric of my pajamas mocked the heat blooming in my chest. My nipples, tight and sensitive, betrayed the chaos in my thoughts. A wave, unfamiliar and potent, washed over me, a confusing mix of embarrassment and a nascent, forbidden curiosity.

Ji-yoo… The name was a silent question in the quiet of my room. What strange power did he wield to leave such a mark with a mere touch? A tremor ran through me as I imagined his gaze now, witnessing the physical manifestation of his unwitting

effect. A dark, rebellious part of me yearned for him to see, to understand the chaotic stir he'd created within my carefully ordered world.

"Fuck him," I breathed, the curse laced with a bewildering mix of resentment and something dangerously close to desire. A futile attempt to banish the intrusive thoughts, to reclaim control over the rebellious sensations that had taken root. But the phantom touch lingered, a haunting reminder of a boundary crossed, a secret awakened in the quiet confines of my own body. The line between annoyance and something darker, something undeniably magnetic, was blurring, and I found myself adrift in its unsettling ambiguity.

The arcade's garish lights and tinny music usually offered a welcome escape, a place to drown out the suffocating expectations that clung to me like expensive cologne. But tonight, the noise felt grating, the flashing screens a dizzying distraction from the singular image burned behind my eyelids: Gyeong-hu.

Her reaction… it replayed in my mind like a broken record. The slight tremor in her hand as she accepted my accidental touch. The almost imperceptible widening of her eyes. It wasn't disgust.

Not entirely. There was a flicker of something else, something that sent a jolt of unwanted awareness through me.

Usually, girls were easy. A flirtatious smile, a careless touch, a whispered compliment – they were predictable in their responses. Gyeong-hu was an anomaly. She was a fortress built of perfect grades and icy composure. And for some twisted reason, that made me want to breach her walls even more.

The bet… it felt cheap now, a pathetic excuse for the sudden, intense focus she had ignited within me. It had started as a game, a way to alleviate the boredom of our gilded cage. But now, it was something else entirely. It was a challenge, a dangerous pull towards the one person who seemed utterly immune to my usual charm.

I watched Joon-ho lose another round, his frustrated curses a dull drone in the background. He was simple, predictable. He wanted So-mi for her looks, a fleeting conquest. My interest in Gyeong-hu was different. It was a dark curiosity, a desire to see what lay beneath the flawless surface. Was there vulnerability? Anger? Passion? The thought of unlocking those hidden depths sent a shiver down my spine, a feeling that was both exhilarating and deeply unsettling.

I leaned against the cold metal of the pinball machine, the silence within my own head a stark contrast to the arcade's cacophony. I didn't want to just win a stupid bet anymore. I wanted to see her unravel. I wanted to be the one to make her lose control, to shatter that perfect composure. And the unsettling truth was, I wasn't sure what I would do once I did. The game had taken a dangerous turn, and I was no longer sure if I was playing to win, or simply to watch everything burn.

Chapter 18: Kim Ji Yoo

The stale air of the arcade clung to me, a familiar perfume of desperation and cheap thrills. Cigarette smoke curled around my head, a hazy halo as I watched Joon-ho flail at the Dance Dance Revolution machine, his movements less "rhythmic expression" and more "confused octopus."

"Dude, you look like you're trying to fight the machine," I said, taking a drag. The cherry glowed a defiant red in the dim light. "Maybe try *stepping* on the arrows, not *body-slamming* them."

Joon-ho, mid-stumble, shot me a glare that could curdle Sunny D. "Easy for you to say, Ji-yoo, you're just standing there looking all cool and detached, slowly turning your lungs into charcoal briquettes."

I exhaled a plume of smoke, watching it dissipate into the arcade's haze of teenage angst and stale popcorn. "Someone has to maintain a semblance of cool in this fluorescent-lit purgatory. Besides, my lungs enjoy a little rebellion. Unlike your ankles, which are clearly staging a protest against your complete lack of coordination."

He tripped, nearly knocking over a kid glued to a Pac-Man screen. "It's the machine's fault! The arrows are totally off-sync.

It's rigged against anyone with even a shred of actual musical taste!"

"Right," I said, taking another drag. "Just like that payphone had a vendetta against your attempts to call your girlfriend last week."

Joon-ho straightened up, puffing out his chest. "That payphone had a faulty dial! This is… digital discrimination." He pointed a shaky finger at the screen, where his avatar was now comically flailing off the platform. "See? It's mocking my superior rock sensibilities!"

"Honey," I said, flicking ash into a nearby overflowing can, "the only one mocking you here is gravity and your own two left feet. Maybe stick to air hockey, where the only coordination required is wrist-flicking and a healthy dose of aggression."

He opened his mouth to retort, then seemed to deflate. "You know what? You're probably right. This is giving me a headache. Let's go grab a Slurpee. Dong-hyun was supposed to meet Hye-jin here to trade mix tapes."

I took one last drag, flicking the cigarette butt into the can. "Finally, a social interaction that doesn't involve you embarrassing yourself in front of blinking lights. Lead the way, Joon-ho. And try not to trip over any Tamagotchis.

The sticky floor of the arcade gave way to the slightly less sticky pavement outside. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows as Joon-ho and I ambled down the street, the remnants of our arcade escapades – the scent of fake cherry and the lingering thump of bass – still clinging to us.

"You know," Joon-ho said, kicking a stray pebble down the sidewalk, "for someone who claims to be all about rebellion, you're awfully concerned about my coordination."

"Someone has to be the voice of reason," I retorted, lighting another cigarette. The first drag was a familiar comfort. "Otherwise, you'd probably end up trying to pole dance with a lamppost."

Just then, a trio of guys swaggered across our path, cutting us off. They looked a couple of years older, the kind who probably hung out by the convenience store, bumming cigarettes and causing trouble. The one in the middle, with a sneer that looked permanently etched on his face, stopped directly in front of us.

"Well, well, well," he drawled, his eyes flicking over us with a dismissive air. "Look what we have here. The resident cool kid and his… shadow." He smirked at Joon-ho.

Joon-ho bristled. "We're not bothering anyone. Move along."

The guy chuckled, a harsh, unpleasant sound. "Oh, but you are. You're occupying valuable sidewalk space. Space that could be used by, you know, actual important people." He gestured to his two cronies, who smirked in agreement.

"And you consider yourselves 'important'?" I asked, taking another drag, letting the smoke curl out slowly. "Based on what? Your impressive collection of questionable fashion choices?"

The guy's sneer tightened. "Watch your mouth, pretty boy. You don't want any trouble."

"Trouble?" I scoffed. "Honey, trouble is my middle name. Though my mom prefers Ji-yoo."

One of his buddies, a lanky guy with a greasy ponytail, stepped closer. "Maybe we should teach you some respect."

Joon-ho, surprisingly, stepped forward, placing himself slightly in front of me. "Back off. We don't want any problems."

"Oh, but we do," the leader said, his eyes narrowing. "You two have that air about you. The 'we're too cool for school' vibe. It's irritating."

"Maybe if you spent less time loitering and more time, I don't know, developing some actual personality, you wouldn't be so easily irritated," I said, taking another drag.

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say. The leader's face hardened. He shoved Joon-ho in the chest. "You got a smart mouth, punk."

Joon-ho stumbled back but held his ground. "And you've got the IQ of a doorknob."

That was it. The leader lunged at Joon-ho, throwing a clumsy punch. Joon-ho, despite his earlier lack of coordination on the dance machine, managed to duck and retaliate with a surprisingly swift jab to the guy's jaw.

The other two jumped in. It was a messy brawl, all flailing limbs and angry shouts. I dropped my cigarette and jumped into the fray, aiming a kick at the lanky guy who was trying to grab Joon-ho from behind. He grunted and stumbled back.

The leader, recovering quickly, swung wildly at me. I managed to block it with my forearm, the impact jarring. We were outnumbered, and they were bigger. But Joon-ho, fueled by adrenaline and probably years of pent-up frustration, was

surprisingly tenacious. He was like a scrappy terrier, nipping at their heels and refusing to go down.

I traded blows with the greasy-haired guy, landing a solid punch to his stomach that made him double over. The leader was focusing on Joon-ho, throwing heavier punches that Joon-ho was mostly dodging or blocking.

It was a chaotic mess of fists and feet. My knuckles stung, and I could taste blood in my mouth. But there was a strange kind of adrenaline coursing through me, a primal satisfaction in fighting back. We were outnumbered, but we were holding our own, fueled by a shared annoyance and a refusal to back down to these wannabe tough guys. The sidewalk had become our arena, and the setting sun cast long, dramatic shadows over our clumsy but determined resistance.

The brawl was a whirlwind of clumsy punches and desperate kicks. Greasy Hair lunged at me again, but this time I sidestepped him, using his momentum to shove him into Lanky, sending them both stumbling into each other like bowling pins.

The Leader, his face contorted in rage, was still trying to land a solid hit on Joon-ho, who was surprisingly agile, ducking and weaving like a caffeinated mosquito. Joon-ho landed a lucky uppercut that made the Leader’s eyes widen in surprise, a trickle of blood appearing at the corner of his mouth.

Seeing their leader momentarily stunned seemed to deflate the other two. Lanky was clutching his stomach, groaning, and Greasy Hair looked more interested in untangling himself from his friend than re-engaging.

I saw my chance. I feinted left, then delivered a solid kick to the Leader’s side. He grunted and stumbled back, clutching his ribs.

Joon-ho, ever the opportunist, followed up with a well-aimed kick to the shin.

The Leader let out a yelp of pain and frustration. He looked at his two disheveled buddies, then back at Joon-ho and me, our chests heaving, knuckles bruised, but our stances firm. The fight had gone out of him.

“This isn’t over,” he spat, his bravado clearly shaken. But his eyes held a flicker of fear.

Without waiting for a reply, he grabbed Lanky’s arm, who was still wheezing, and nodded curtly at Greasy Hair. The three of them, looking considerably less swaggering than they had moments before, started to back away.

They didn’t just back away; they practically scurried. Their tough-guy act had completely evaporated, replaced by a desperate need to put distance between themselves and two teenagers who had unexpectedly fought back with more grit than they’d anticipated.

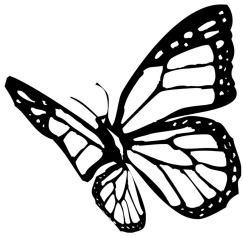
We watched them disappear around the corner, their retreating figures a testament to our messy but ultimately successful defense. Joon-ho and I stood there, panting, the adrenaline slowly starting to recede, leaving behind a dull ache in our muscles and the metallic taste of blood in my mouth.

“Well,” Joon-ho said, a lopsided grin spreading across his face, his lip slightly swollen, “that was… eventful.”

I nodded, spitting out a bit of blood. “Yeah. Remind me to add ‘street fighter’ to my nonexistent resume.” Despite the throbbing in my knuckles, a small, satisfied smirk tugged at my lips. We had won. And those puffed-up losers had learned a valuable

lesson about underestimating the so-called “cool kid” and his “shadow.”

Chapter 19: Lee Gyeong Hu



The late afternoon sun cast long, melancholic rays through the sheer curtains of my room, painting stripes of light and shadow across the polished wooden floor. Outside, the manicured gardens lay still, a stark contrast to the turbulent landscape of my thoughts. Ji-yoo. His unexpected ferocity, the raw, untamed energy he had exuded in my memory, replayed like a scene from a dark, captivating film. A shiver traced its way down my spine, a confusing blend of unease and a reluctant, burgeoning fascination. What had ignited such a primal instinct in him? And why did the image of him, bruised and defiant, linger so persistently in my mind?

A soft knock at my door broke through the heavy silence of my contemplation. "Yes, come in," I murmured, my voice sounding distant even to my own ears.

The door creaked open, and Mrs. Kim, her kind face etched with a gentle concern, stepped into the room. "Miss Gyeong-hu, your mother, Miss Eun-ji, called for you. Some guests have arrived."

Guests. The word felt jarring, an intrusion into the private world I had constructed within the confines of my room, a space where Ji-yoo's memory held sway. "Okay, Mrs. Kim. I'll be there," I replied, forcing a semblance of normalcy into my tone.

She nodded, her gaze lingering on me for a moment before she quietly withdrew, leaving me once again to the disquieting echo of my

thoughts. I ran a hand through my disheveled hair, the strands feeling heavy and lifeless. With a sigh, I smoothed down my dress and made my way downstairs, each step a reluctant surrender to the demands of my carefully orchestrated life.

The grand hall of our home was bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun, the air filled with the murmur of polite conversation. My mother's bright laughter echoed across the marble floors as she stood engaged in animated conversation with a woman I vaguely recognized as Mrs. Park, a frequent guest at our meticulously planned social gatherings. And then my gaze fell upon the figure standing quietly beside Mrs. Park, a girl who exuded an air of detached boredom, her posture suggesting a reluctant participant in this familial ritual. Her eyes scanned the opulent surroundings with a distinct lack of interest, a mirror of the apathy I often felt in these very halls.

And then I saw her face clearly. A jolt of surprise, a sudden spark of genuine excitement, coursed through me. "So-mi!" The name escaped my lips before I could consciously register it, a spontaneous exclamation of recognition and unexpected joy.

Her head snapped up, her previously listless expression instantly transforming. Her eyes widened, a genuine smile illuminating her features. A warmth spread across her face, chasing away the earlier indifference.

Our mothers turned towards us, their polite smiles tinged with curiosity. "Gyeong-hu, do you both know each other?" my mother inquired, her eyebrows slightly raised.

A genuine smile bloomed on my own face as I walked towards them, the earlier weight in my chest momentarily forgotten. "Yes, Mother," I replied, my gaze fixed on So-mi. "She is my senior at Seonghwa Academy. And my friend. She is the one who did my… makeover at school, remember? The day you said I was looking particularly pretty." A subtle blush rose to my cheeks at the memory, but the genuine pleasure of seeing So-mi again overshadowed any lingering

awkwardness. The unexpected encounter felt like a small, welcome crack in the carefully constructed facade of my day, a sudden burst of authentic connection in the predictable landscape of my life

"Cool to see you here, Gyeong-hu," So-mi said, her smile genuine, a stark contrast to the bored indifference she had exuded downstairs. There was a flicker of something else in her eyes too, a hint of shared mischief, a silent acknowledgment of the different personas we wore in different settings.

"Yeah, nice to see you too," I replied, the surprise still bubbling within me. It was an unexpected bridge between the rigid world of Seonghwa and the carefully curated elegance of my home.

My mother, ever the gracious hostess and subtle orchestrator, beamed at us. "Well, then! Gyeong-hu, why don't you take So-mi up to your room? You two can catch up and enjoy each other's company."

Mrs. Sam, So-mi's mother, offered a tight, polite smile. "Yes, go on, So-mi. And as Gyeong-hu is your friend… well, you know she's a top student. Even though you're her senior, perhaps you could still learn a thing or two from her diligence." The words were delivered with a saccharine sweetness that didn't quite mask the underlying expectation, the subtle pressure to conform to a certain image.

So-mi’s initial warmth seemed to recede slightly at her mother’s pronouncement. A shadow of annoyance flickered across her features, a brief but telling glimpse of the rebellious spirit I had witnessed at school. She offered a curt nod, her lips pressed into a thin line, the carefree coolness momentarily eclipsed by a palpable frustration. It was as if an invisible leash had tightened around her, the weight of expectation stealing the very air from her lungs.

I caught her eye and offered a small, understanding smile. I knew that feeling, the suffocating pressure of parental expectations, the constant scrutiny. "Come on, So-mi," I said, turning towards the stairs. "My room is… less about diligence and more about questionable taste in music posters."

As we ascended the grand staircase, the polished wood gleaming under the soft light, So-mi's shoulders seemed to relax ever so slightly. The forced politeness of downstairs began to dissipate, replaced by a more familiar, easygoing demeanor. In school, she moved with an effortless confidence, a member of Ji-yoo's orbit, radiating a cool detachment that both intrigued and slightly intimidated me. But here, under the watchful eye of her mother, she had seemed like a caged bird, her vibrant energy stifled. It was a stark reminder that even the seemingly untouchable operated under their own set of constraints, their outward bravado sometimes masking an inner weariness. As we reached the sanctuary of my room, I hoped we could both shed the expectations of our respective worlds and simply be ourselves, at least for a little while.

Stepping into the relative chaos of my room – a stark contrast to the pristine order downstairs – seemed to allow So-mi to finally exhale. She glanced around at the scattered manga volumes, the half-finished sketches, and the posters of bands my mother politely pretended didn't exist. A small, genuine smile touched her lips.

"This is more like it," she said, sinking onto the plush cushions of my window seat. "Way less… suffocating than down there."

I chuckled, settling beside her. "Tell me about it. So, that last-minute escape from school… pretty epic, right?"

So-mi's eyes lit up. "Epic is an understatement! Joon-ho almost gave Mr. Lee a heart attack when he 'accidentally' set off the fire alarm. Good times." She grinned, a hint of the rebellious spirit I knew so well shining through.

A comfortable silence settled between us for a moment, the shared memory a quiet bond. Then, I found myself venturing into more personal territory. "So… Joon-ho. You guys seem pretty close."

A softer expression flickered across So-mi's face. "Yeah, Joon-ho… he's been around forever. We grew up together. He's like… a really annoying but somehow lovable brother."

A softer expression flickered across So-mi's face. "Yeah, Joon-ho… he's been around forever. We grew up together. He's like… a really annoying but somehow lovable brother."

So-mi laughed, a light, dismissive sound. "Nah. Joon-ho? He's got a wandering eye the size of the Pacific Ocean. Trust me, I know his 'type.' It's usually someone blonde, bubbly, and easily impressed. Definitely not someone who's going to call him out on his BS."

"But… he seems different around you," I persisted, a flicker of something I couldn't quite name stirring within me. "He seems… more attentive."

She shook her head, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "That's just Joon-ho being Joon-ho. He's a charmer, I'll give him that. But a player through and through. I've seen him cycle through more girls than I've had questionable hair dye phases. Trust me, Gyeong-hu, there's nothing romantic brewing there on my end, and definitely not on his."

Then, her gaze turned to me, a curious glint in her eyes. "So, what about you and Kim Ji-Yoo? There were definitely some… interesting vibes during that whole time when we bunked."

A flush crept up my neck. "Ji-yoo and me? No, definitely not. You know he's… involved with someone." The words felt inadequate, a clumsy dismissal of the complex emotions he stirred within me.

So-mi raised a skeptical eyebrow, a knowing smirk spreading across her face. "So? I've never seen him look at any other girl the way he looks at you. There's this… intensity. Like he can't quite figure you out, and it's driving him crazy." She leaned forward slightly, her gaze direct. "Trust me, Gyeong-hu, I've seen Ji-yoo with a lot of girls. This… this feels different." Her words hung in the air, a subtle challenge to the carefully constructed denial I had been clinging to. The casual question had peeled back a layer, exposing the uncomfortable truth that perhaps, just perhaps, I wasn't the only one grappling with the unexpected undercurrents that had begun to ripple through our carefully ordered worlds.

A strange warmth bloomed in my chest at So-mi's words, an unexpected flicker of hope in the carefully constructed darkness of my secret longings. *Princess.* The way the word rolled off his tongue, a casual endearment that held a weight I couldn't quite decipher. Deep down, a foolish, desperate part of me yearned for So-mi's observation to be true, a silent prayer whispered to a god I wasn't even sure I believed in.

So-mi broke the fragile silence, her gaze unwavering. "And the way he calls you 'princess'… that's not just some random nickname, Gyeong-hu. I think there's something in his heart for you."

My heart skipped a treacherous beat, a sudden, erratic rhythm that threatened to betray the carefully constructed composure I tried so hard to maintain. I cleared my throat, the sound feeling oddly loud in the quiet of my room. "I… I don't know what you're talking about," I stammered, reaching for the glass of water on my bedside table. The cool liquid did little to quell the sudden heat that had risen to my cheeks. I had to act normal, dismissive, as if her words were nothing more than teenage fantasy. "And besides," I continued, forcing a light, self-deprecating tone, "I'm hardly his type. I'm just the teacher's pet in his eyes, remember?"

So-mi's gaze sharpened, a knowing glint in her eyes. "But you broke rules because of him, Gyeong-hu. That day you skipped school, that wasn't the goody-two-shoes I know."

My defenses went up instantly. "No, I didn't do it *because* of him. I just… I wanted to taste freedom. He just… helped me experience it." I shifted on the window seat, suddenly feeling restless. "He helped me find friends like you. He made me a… a member of your group. And besides," I added, trying to sound nonchalant, "he has So-ah. His girlfriend. I'm just a friend. So, let's just leave it at that." I looked away, my gaze fixed on the distant rooftops, the lie hanging heavy in the air between us. "And I also don't feel romantically for him," I added, the words a hollow echo of the truth that churned within me. Liar. I was a fucking great liar, capable of constructing elaborate walls of denial to protect the fragile, forbidden feelings that had taken root in my heart. The image of Ji-yoo, bruised and defiant, flashed in my mind, a stark reminder of the unexpected connection that had sparked between us, a connection I desperately tried to downplay, even as a secret part of me clung to So-mi's hopeful words.

So-mi studied me for a long moment, her gaze sharp and perceptive. I held my breath, willing my expression to remain neutral, to betray none of the turmoil churning within me. The silence stretched, thick with unspoken understanding and the weight of my carefully constructed lie.

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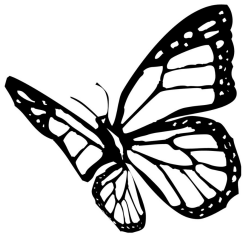
She shifted on the window seat, breaking the tense silence with a more casual tone. "So, enough about the brooding bad boy and the prim princess who secretly yearns for freedom. What else have you been up to? Any more daring escapades planned?"

The change in topic was a welcome reprieve. I forced a smile, relieved that she had seemingly accepted my flimsy denial. "Nothing quite as dramatic as skipping school," I said, a small, genuine laugh escaping my lips. "Mostly just the usual mountain of homework and my mother's endless parade of social engagements."

The conversation drifted to lighter topics – school gossip, the latest trends in music, our shared exasperation with certain teachers. So-mi's easygoing nature and sharp wit were a welcome distraction, pulling me away from the dangerous territory of my feelings for Ji-yoo. As we talked and laughed, a sense of normalcy returned to the room, the earlier tension dissipating like smoke in the wind.

Yet, even as I engaged in the lighthearted banter, So-mi's words lingered in the back of my mind, a persistent echo of a possibility I desperately tried to suppress but secretly longed for. *Princess.* The way he said it. The intensity in his gaze. The rules I had broken. The carefully constructed walls around my heart felt a little weaker, a little less impenetrable than they had before. So-mi might have been convinced by my words, but a small, rebellious part of me knew the truth. And that truth, however dangerous, held a strange and undeniable allure.

Chapter 20: Lee Gyeong Hu



The next day at Seonghwa Academy felt strangely muted, the usual chaotic energy of students flowing through the hallways a dull hum against the silent turmoil within me. During homeroom, Mr. Kang, the music teacher, announced the annual school singing competition. Two weeks were allocated for selections, a wave of excited whispers rippling through the classroom. My own heart gave a painful lurch. Performing. Singing. It was a dream I had nurtured since childhood, a secret flame that flickered within me, a desperate yearning to express the emotions that often felt trapped behind the walls of my mother's rigid expectations.

But the familiar weight of her disapproval settled upon me like a shroud. *No, Gyeong-hu. Your focus must remain on your studies. Extracurricular activities are a distraction.* Her voice, though absent, echoed clearly in my mind, effectively silencing the hopeful spark that had briefly ignited. I remained quiet, my hands clasped tightly in my lap, the vibrant melody in my soul once again muted by the chains of her control. A deep longing for escape, for a life where my passions weren't deemed a hindrance, washed over me.

When lunchtime arrived, I moved through the crowded hallways in a silent daze, the boisterous laughter and chatter of my classmates a stark contrast to the quiet ache in my chest. I made my way to our usual table in the bustling cafeteria, the familiar sight of So-mi, Joon-ho, Hye-jin, and Dong-hyun a small anchor in the sea of my swirling emotions.

"Hey," I murmured, sliding into the empty seat beside So-mi.

"Hey, Gyeong-hu," they replied in unison.

"Where's Ji-yoo?" I asked, trying to sound casual, though a subtle anticipation fluttered within me.

"He went to place our order," Dong-hyun replied, already halfway through a plate of what looked suspiciously like mystery meat.

"Nice," I said, my gaze drifting towards the counter, half-expecting to see him.

"What are you in the mood for?" Joon-ho asked, ever the practical one. "I can tell Ji-yoo so he brings yours too."

"Just a coffee and a packet of chips, I think," I replied, my appetite dulled by the lingering disappointment of the morning announcement.

"Alright, got it," Joon-ho said, pushing back his chair.

"Hey, wait," I called out, reaching for my wallet. "Let me give you the money."

He turned back, a wide, easy grin on his face. "Nah, don't worry about it. Ji-yoo's treating everyone today." And before I could formulate a response, he winked and headed towards the

counter, disappearing into the throng of students surrounding Ji-yoo. A strange warmth spread through me at the unexpected gesture, a small, inexplicable kindness that felt like a tiny crack in the wall of my carefully guarded emotions.

My gaze snapped to Hye-jin, my eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "So, why the sudden generosity? What's the occasion for this treat?"

Dong-hyun chuckled, a knowing glint in his eyes, but it was Hye-jin who answered. "Because it's kind of a tradition in our group. Whenever someone gets a breakup, they treat everyone."

My eyes widened in disbelief, my heart suddenly hammering against my ribs. "W-what do you mean?" The words caught in my throat, a strange mix of shock and a hesitant, almost fearful anticipation.

So-mi jumped in, her tone matter-of-fact. "Don't you know? So-ah and Ji-yoo broke up."

Hye-jin quickly corrected her, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "No, no, no, wrong sentence, So-mi. Not 'So-ah and Ji-yoo broke up.' It's 'Ji-yoo broke up with So-ah, and she practically begged him not to leave her.'"

My curiosity was now a frantic, clawing thing. "Really? And… why did he break up with her?"

So-mi leaned forward slightly, her expression turning serious. "First thing, Ji-yoo never really liked her that much. And second… she was cheating on him."

My eyebrows shot up, a silent exclamation of surprise. Dong-hyun chimed in, a wry smile on his face. "And besides,

she was a pain in all of our asses. Trust me, none of us actually liked her."

Hye-jin nodded in agreement. "Yeah, she was pretty unbearable."

So-mi then added, her gaze turning thoughtful. "She is beautiful, I'll give her that. But… I think when she saw you looking so beautiful that day, Gyeong-hu… she got incredibly jealous."

A strange mix of emotions swirled within me – shock, a flicker of something akin to vindication, and a burgeoning, almost terrifying hope. Ji-yoo was single. He had ended things with So-ah. And… had I somehow played a part in it? The thought sent a nervous tremor through me, a dangerous seed of possibility taking root in the fertile ground of my secret desires.

Ji-yoo returned to the table, Joon-ho trailing behind him, laden with trays of food and drinks. "Hey, princess," Ji-yoo said, his voice casual yet carrying a warmth that sent a strange flutter through my stomach. He placed a steaming cup of coffee and a packet of my favorite chips in front of me. The nickname, so casually delivered, made my insides twist with a confusing mix of nervousness and a secret, foolish delight.

"Hey, Ji-yoo," I replied, trying to keep my voice even. I paused, forcing myself to meet his gaze. "How are you?"

He looked genuinely happy, a bright smile lighting up his features as he slid into the seat beside me. "I'm fine. More than fine, actually. Very happy." He stretched his arms out expansively. "Finally, that whole charade of overacting isn't hanging around anymore."

A genuine chuckle escaped my lips, and the others at the table laughed along with me. I took a slow sip of my coffee, the warmth spreading through me. Just then, I overheard two students at the next table animatedly discussing the upcoming singing competition. The words hit me like a physical blow. My throat tightened, and the joy of the moment seemed to drain away, leaving a hollow ache in its place.

The coffee suddenly tasted bitter. The packet of chips remained unopened in front of me. My earlier lightheartedness vanished, replaced by a heavy wave of disappointment. The conversation around me continued, a lively buzz of laughter and chatter, but I retreated into myself, the weight of my unspoken dreams pressing down on me. The longing to perform, to finally unleash the music that lived within me, was a sharp, painful yearning. But the unyielding wall of my mother's disapproval loomed large, a constant reminder of the chains that bound me. I sat with my friends, physically present but emotionally miles away, lost in the silent lament of a dream deferred, perhaps forever.

The bell shrilled, a jarring interruption to the heavy silence that had settled over me. Hye-jin, So-mi, and Dong-hyun gathered their things and headed towards their respective classes. Joon-ho lingered for a moment, exchanging a knowing glance with Ji-yoo, before he too stood to leave. I rose, the weight of my unspoken disappointment still heavy in my chest, and turned to make my way to my next class.

"Princess, wait."

The sound of his voice, low and unexpectedly gentle, stopped me in my tracks. I turned to face him. Ji-yoo stood there, his gaze fixed on me. He gave a subtle nod towards Joon-ho, who

seemed to understand instantly and quietly walked away, leaving us alone amidst the lingering lunchtime bustle.

Ji-yoo closed the distance between us, his eyes holding a seriousness I hadn't seen before. My heart pounded in my chest, a frantic drum against my ribs. *This is it,* a foolish, hopeful voice whispered within me. *He knows. He feels it too.* I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. "Yes, Ji-yoo?"

He reached out, his fingers brushing against mine before he gently took my hand, his touch sending a jolt of unexpected warmth through me. He didn't say a word, but his eyes seemed to beckon me, and he began to lead me away from the crowded hallway, towards the quieter sanctuary of the school garden.

The late afternoon sun dappled through the leaves, casting intricate patterns on the winding paths. We walked in silence, his hand still holding mine, the simple contact sending a flurry of nervous anticipation through me. When we reached a secluded bench nestled beneath the shade of an old oak tree, he finally stopped and turned to face me, his expression earnest.

No words came out of my own throat. I simply looked at him, my breath caught in my chest, a thousand unspoken hopes and fears swirling within me.

He broke the silence, his voice low and steady. "I was observing you the whole time during lunch."

My eyes widened slightly. I blinked once, then twice, a nervous flutter in my chest.

"And you looked different from usual," he continued, his gaze intense.

I licked my lips, trying to appear normal, my mind racing. *He noticed. He actually noticed.*

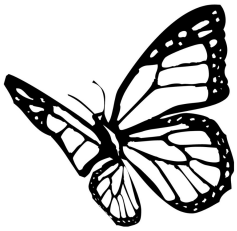
"You looked sad, princess," he said softly, the nickname now carrying a different weight, a hint of genuine concern. "The whole time. I know something's wrong, and you know you can share it with me."

My foolish heart leaped, the hopeful whisper growing louder. *He cares. He really cares.* For a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to believe that this was it, the moment my secret longings would finally be acknowledged. Perhaps he wouldn't confess some grand romantic love, but he would see me, truly see the sadness that had been my constant companion.

But then, his gaze deepened, his eyes seeming to look straight through the carefully constructed walls I had built around my emotions. "Yes," he said, his voice quiet but firm, "you were sad. Every fucking second. Your heart was breaking, wasn't it?"

His words hit me with the force of a physical blow. Not a confession of love, not a tender advance, but a stark, unwavering observation of my inner turmoil. He saw it. He saw the sadness I had tried so hard to conceal. And in that moment, stripped bare by his perceptive gaze, the carefully constructed facade I had maintained crumbled, leaving me vulnerable and exposed. He was right. One hundred percent right. My heart *was* breaking.

Chapter 21: Lee Gyeong Hu



His grey eyes, the color of a stormy sky, seemed to pierce through every layer of my carefully constructed defenses, dissecting my very soul. I wanted to confess, to finally unburden myself, but the ingrained fear of my mother's disapproval held my tongue captive. "Nothing happened," I mumbled, the lie sounding weak even to my own ears.

His grip on my shoulders tightened, not painfully, but with a firm insistence that brooked no argument. "Shut up, idiot," he said, the endearment laced with a surprising edge of command. "Tell me what happened?" It wasn't a request; it was an order, delivered with an authority that, strangely, didn't feel unwelcome.

"There's a competition," I began, my voice barely above a whisper. "A singing competition."

He looked at me intently, his gaze unwavering. "And?" he prompted, the single word hanging in the air.

"I… ummmm… I…" I looked away, unable to meet his intense stare.

His hand moved from my shoulder, his fingers gently but firmly grasping my chin, tilting my face upwards, forcing me to look directly into his grey eyes once more. "And what, princess?

Hmm?" he asked softly, the endearment sending a shiver down my spine.

"And I want to take part in it," I finally confessed, the words a hushed admission of my deepest desire.

He didn't release his hold on my chin. A small, enigmatic smile played on his lips. "So, my princess is a good singer as well? Huh?" My stomach twisted at the possessive pronoun, a strange flutter of both nervousness and exhilaration. "I want to hear the melody from those lips someday." For a fleeting moment, I forgot how to breathe, my heart hammering a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

He leaned down, his face inches from mine, his breath ghosting over my lips. He hooked his index finger under my chin, tilting my face up even further, his gaze searching mine, reading the unspoken emotions that swirled within me. "But what's the matter, little butterfly? Why so sad?"

I tried to speak, but the proximity, the intensity of his gaze, rendered me momentarily speechless. "Oh, umm… I… ummm… Ji-yoo, my mother is…"

He cut me off, his voice a low murmur. "Hmm? What about your mother, princess?"

I finally found my voice, the words tumbling out in a rush. "She won't allow me."

A slow smirk spread across his lips, a hint of something rebellious and thrilling in his eyes. "And why do you need her permission when you can secretly follow your passion?"

His words hung in the air, a dangerous invitation to defy the very foundation of my carefully constructed life. Secretly follow my passion. The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating, a forbidden fruit dangled before my starving soul.

My mind raced, a whirlwind of fear and a desperate yearning for freedom. My mother's disapproval was a force of nature in my world, an unyielding storm that could upend everything. Yet, the image of myself on a stage, finally able to express the music within me, flickered like a fragile flame in the darkness.

"But… she'll find out," I whispered, the fear in my voice palpable. "She always does."

His thumb gently stroked my chin, his gaze softening slightly, though the underlying intensity remained. "Maybe. But maybe not. And even if she does… so what, princess? It's your life, your dream. Why let her cage your voice before it even has a chance to sing?"

His words were a potent cocktail of recklessness and a strange, unwavering belief in me. It was a perspective so foreign to my own, so utterly at odds with the life I had always known. Yet, there was a compelling truth in his defiance, a liberating audacity that resonated deep within me.

"But… the consequences…" I stammered, the weight of potential repercussions pressing down on me.

He leaned a fraction closer, his breath warm against my cheek. "The only real consequence, princess, is living a life where you never dared to chase what makes your heart beat faster. What's more terrifying than that?"

His question hung in the air, unanswered. He didn't push, didn't demand an immediate response. He simply held my gaze, his grey eyes filled with an unwavering conviction that chipped away at the walls of my fear.

The bell for the next class rang again, its insistent tone a stark reminder of the world outside our secluded corner of the garden. The moment hung suspended, a precipice between the life I had always known and a potential future I had only dared to dream of.

Ji-yoo's hand was still on my chin, his touch a silent anchor. His eyes held mine, a silent invitation to step into the unknown. The fear was still there, a cold knot in my stomach, but something else was stirring within me now, a fragile seed of courage, watered by his unexpected belief.

I swallowed hard, my gaze locked with his. The answer wasn't yet formed, the path ahead still shrouded in uncertainty. But for the first time, a tiny whisper of defiance echoed within me. Maybe… maybe he was right.

I looked into his grey eyes, the unwavering belief I saw reflected there a stark contrast to the fear that still gnawed at me. But something had shifted, a tiny crack had appeared in the wall of my apprehension, letting in a sliver of daring possibility. A small, hesitant smile touched my lips. "Okay, then. Let's give it a try," I said, the words feeling foreign yet liberating as they left my tongue.

A single eyebrow arched, a hint of playful surprise in his expression, before a wider, more confident smile spread across his face. "So, princess is finally ready to unleash that hidden talent, huh?" He chuckled softly. "Alright then, let's sign up your

name and get you an audition in front of the teachers so you can get selected."

I looked at him, a fresh wave of nervousness washing over me. "Now?"

He smirked, a familiar spark of recklessness in his eyes. "Now or never, princess. Strike while the iron's hot, or in this case, while your newfound rebellious spirit is still burning bright."

He didn't wait for a response, simply took my hand again, his grip firm and reassuring, and led me through the bustling hallways towards the music room. The process was a blur – filling out the form with trembling hands, the ink smudging slightly, Ji-yoo standing beside me, a silent pillar of support.

And then, suddenly, I was standing in front of a panel of teachers, their expectant gazes fixed on me. The small room felt vast and echoing, the silence amplifying the frantic beating of my heart. My palms were sweaty, my throat dry. I glanced at Ji-yoo, who stood just to the side, his expression calm and encouraging. He offered a small, reassuring nod. The nervousness was a suffocating weight, threatening to steal my voice before I even had a chance to sing.

Mr. Yun, the head of the music department, cleared his throat, his gaze gentle but expectant. "Whenever you're ready, Miss Gyeong-hu. Please, sing for us."

The weight of their attention pressed down on me, each pair of eyes a silent judgment. I looked at them, my mind a blank canvas of fear. Then my gaze drifted to Ji-yoo, who stood just outside the panel's direct line of sight, his presence a silent anchor in the storm of my nerves. Beside him, Mrs. Cho, my homeroom teacher, offered a small, encouraging smile.

My hands trembled visibly. I instinctively crossed my arms, a futile attempt to conceal the nervous tremor. My throat felt constricted, as if an invisible hand were squeezing it shut. No sound would come. The melody that usually flowed so freely within me was now trapped, a prisoner of my fear.

The silence stretched, punctuated only by the frantic rhythm of my own heart. Just as I thought I might crumble under the pressure, a melody began to form in my mind, a simple, heartfelt tune that seemed to rise from the depths of my long-suppressed emotions. And then, the words followed, hesitant at first, then gaining strength, pouring out like a dam finally breaking:

Chains around my heart, they held me tight,
Shadows in the corners, stealing all the light.
Whispers in the silence, telling me to stay,
But a melody inside, was longing for the day.

Like a fragile bird, I beat against the bars,
Dreaming of the open sky, reaching for the stars.
A hidden song within, a story yet untold,
Breaking through the silence, brave and strong and bold.

Fear was a cold hand, gripping at my soul,
Doubt a heavy blanket, taking its control.
But a flicker of defiance, a whisper in the breeze,
Told me there was something more, beyond the unease.

Like a fragile bird, I beat against the bars,
Dreaming of the open sky, reaching for the stars.
A hidden song within, a story yet untold,
Breaking through the silence, brave and strong and bold.

My voice, though initially shaky, gained confidence with each passing line. The emotions I had held captive for so long poured into the melody, a raw and honest expression of my yearning for freedom. I closed my eyes, lost in the music, the faces of the teachers and the weight of their judgment fading into the background. For the first time, I wasn't Gyeong-hu, the dutiful daughter. I was simply a voice, finally finding its song.

As the final note faded, a profound silence filled the room. I kept my eyes closed for a moment longer, the echo of the melody still resonating within me. It felt as if a great weight had been lifted, a dam of pent-up emotion finally breached.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. The teachers' expressions were no longer judgmental, but rather a mixture of surprise and a quiet appreciation. Mr. Yun cleared his throat, a small smile gracing his lips. "That was… quite moving, Miss Gyeong-hu. You have a very lovely voice, full of emotion."

Mrs. Cho nodded in agreement, her eyes shining slightly. "Indeed, Gyeong-hu. We had no idea you possessed such talent."

A wave of relief washed over me, so potent it almost buckled my knees. A small, hesitant smile touched my own lips.

Then, I heard it – a single, distinct clap cutting through the lingering silence. I turned to see Ji-yoo, a wide, genuine smile on his face, his eyes sparkling with pride. He clapped again, a slow, deliberate sound that seemed to fill the entire room.

A warmth spread through my chest, chasing away the last vestiges of my nervousness. His simple gesture, his obvious happiness for me, was more validating than any words the teachers could have offered.

Mr. Yun addressed me again. "Well, Miss Gyeong-hu, it seems we have a new contender. We'll post the official list of selected participants by the end of the week, but I think I can safely say… welcome to the competition."

A genuine smile finally bloomed on my face, a lightness I hadn't felt in years bubbling up inside me. "Thank you," I managed, my voice still a little shaky but filled with a newfound joy.

As the teachers began to discuss the next steps, Ji-yoo walked towards me, his smile still radiant. "Princess," he said softly, his eyes filled with genuine admiration. "That was… incredible. Absolutely incredible." He reached out and gently squeezed my hand. "I knew you had it in you."

His belief, his unwavering support, was a tangible thing, a warmth that enveloped me. For the first time, I felt truly seen, truly heard. And in that moment, standing in the quiet music room, the fear of my mother's disapproval seemed a little less daunting, overshadowed by the exhilarating possibility of finally embracing my dream.

Chapter 22: Kim Ji Yoo

I watched her, a strange mix of detached amusement and a flicker of something akin to… recognition? No, not recognition. Observation. Clinical observation. Her eyes held a desperate yearning, a hunger for something beyond the suffocating perfection she projected. Freedom, yes. Friends, a clumsy attempt to fit into our chaotic world. And maybe, just maybe, a pathetic craving for something she labeled as love.

A bitter smirk twisted my lips. Love. Such a fragile, easily manipulated emotion. And Lee Gyeong-hu, with her repressed desires and yearning gaze, was ripe for the plucking. The bet with those losers by the bleachers still rankled. Bowing to *them*? Unthinkable. My reputation, my carefully cultivated image of effortless cool, wouldn't survive such a humiliation.

No. There was a better way. A far more entertaining way to win. I would give her what she craved. A taste of freedom, a sense of belonging, a carefully orchestrated illusion of affection. I would fan the flames of her naive little heart, watch it flutter with pathetic hope, all for the satisfaction of winning a stupid bet.

Her "little princess heart." The phrase echoed in my mind with a cruel amusement. What did I care if it shattered into a million pieces? It was her own damn fault for being so susceptible, for

mistaking my calculated moves for genuine interest. I was a player. It was in my blood. Girls were pawns in a game I always won.

Joon-ho was the only one who knew the stakes. The others were too caught up in their own dramas to notice the subtle manipulations at play. But today… today a sliver of something unexpected had flickered within me. A fleeting sense of… sympathy? Disgusting. But the way her voice had trembled, the raw emotion in her song… it was a glimpse behind the "topper" facade. Maybe she was as trapped as I was, albeit by different chains. Her mother's suffocating rules, my own self-imposed cage of cynicism.

But there was a crucial difference. She obeyed. Even when her soul screamed for release, she bowed to authority. I, on the other hand, reveled in breaking every damn rule. That was the chasm between us. No chance of me falling for a rule-follower, no matter how surprisingly soulful her voice might be.

Still, the victory was sweet. The applause, the surprised admiration in the teachers' eyes… and the way *her* eyes had lit up when I clapped. Pathetic. But useful.

I walked towards her, a practiced smile plastered on my face. "So, princess," I said, my voice laced with a faux enthusiasm. "Let's tell everyone the good news. The little songbird has been selected. The whole school needs to hear your… talent." My gaze held hers, a predatory glint hidden beneath the surface of my charming facade. The game was on. And Lee Gyeong-hu, whether she knew it or not, was my unwitting pawn.

I watched her face, the relief and burgeoning joy still softening her usually guarded features. It was almost… unsettling. Almost enough to make me forget the game. Almost.

"Let's not make a huge announcement just yet," she said, her voice hesitant, a flicker of her usual apprehension returning. "Maybe… maybe we should just keep it between us for now?"

A sardonic smile played on my lips. "And deny you your moment in the spotlight, princess? After that performance? The school deserves to hear your angelic voice." My words were dripping with a false sincerity that even Joon-ho would have applauded.

She bit her lip, her gaze darting around the room. "It's just… my mother. I haven't told her anything yet."

Ah, the ever-present shadow of the Ice Queen. Perfect. More leverage. "Then let this be our little secret for now," I said, lowering my voice conspiratorially, leaning in close enough that she could feel my breath on her ear. "A secret just between the princess and her… admirer." I watched the subtle blush creep up her neck, a pathetic but predictable reaction.

"But… what if someone asks?" she whispered, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and a naive trust.

"Then you simply say you auditioned," I replied smoothly. "No need for grand pronouncements until the official list is posted. Keeps things… interesting, don't you think?" The thrill of the manipulation, the subtle control I was exerting, was a familiar and intoxicating sensation.

I took her hand again, my grip firm. "Come on, princess. Let's go find Joon-ho. He'll be ecstatic to hear your… progress." I led her out of the music room, my smile fixed, the image of her hopeful

face a fleeting satisfaction before the next move in my carefully orchestrated game. The bet was as good as won. It was only a matter of time before Lee Gyeong-hu, blinded by her desperate longing, would fall right into my carefully laid trap. And I would be there to catch her… only to watch her plummet.

As we walked, I kept my arm linked with hers, a casual possessiveness that seemed to fluster her slightly. Her steps were hesitant, as if she were still processing everything that had just happened. I could feel the nervous energy radiating off her, a stark contrast to the surprising confidence she had displayed during her audition.

We found Joon-ho leaning against a wall, looking bored and flipping through a dog-eared manga. "Yo, Romeo! What took you so long?" he asked, then his gaze landed on Gyeong-hu, a questioning look in his eyes.

Before I could say anything, Gyeong-hu spoke, her voice still carrying a hint of nervous excitement. "I… I auditioned for the singing competition."

Joon-ho's jaw literally dropped. His manga slipped from his grasp and landed with a soft thud on the floor. His eyes, usually filled with a laid-back amusement, were wide with genuine shock. He stared at Gyeong-hu, then swiveled his gaze to me, a silent "you're kidding me, right?" etched on his face.

"You… you sang?" Joon-ho stammered, his usual witty banter completely absent. "Lee Gyeong-hu? The… the top student? Sang?" He looked genuinely bewildered, as if a fundamental law of the universe had just been defied.

I smirked, enjoying his reaction. "The princess has hidden talents, Joon-ho. Turns out she has a voice that could melt

glaciers." My words were laced with a playful exaggeration, but even I had to admit, her performance had been unexpectedly captivating.

Joon-ho continued to stare at Gyeong-hu, his shock slowly giving way to a grudging admiration. "Wow," he finally said, shaking his head in disbelief. "I… I didn't see that coming." He looked at Gyeong-hu with a newfound respect. "That's… actually pretty cool, Gyeong-hu."

Gyeong-hu blushed slightly at his unexpected praise, a small, shy smile gracing her lips. The surprise on Joon-ho's face was almost comical, a testament to the carefully constructed image she usually projected. Even my closest friend, someone who thought he had me all figured out, was thrown off by this unexpected revelation. It was… almost satisfying. Almost enough to make me forget, for a fleeting moment, the cold calculation behind my actions. Almost.

Gyeong-hu, a soft smile still playing on her lips, excused herself, saying she needed to get to her next class. As she walked away, her figure framed by the large windows overlooking the hallway, I watched her. There was a lightness in her steps, a newfound radiance that hadn't been there before. She looked… genuinely happy. A strange, unfamiliar twinge resonated within me, quickly dismissed as the satisfaction of a plan coming together.

I turned back to Joon-ho, a smirk playing on my lips as I caught his still-bewildered expression. "Ji-yoo?" he finally managed, his voice a mixture of awe and disbelief. "Ji-yoo, she… wooooo, dude. You are the lord of girls. You just… you just pull them out of thin air!" He shook his head, still processing what he had just witnessed. "The quiet, studious Lee Gyeong-hu… singing? And actually being… good?"

I followed Gyeong-hu's progress down the hallway, my gaze lingering on her retreating figure. "That, my dear Joon-ho," I said, my voice a low drawl, "is the secret. Give a girl what she needs, what she secretly craves, and she's putty in your hands." I watched as she disappeared into her classroom, that small smile still gracing her lips. A flicker of something… almost like pride?… surfaced and was instantly suppressed.

Joon-ho, however, was still fixated on the unexpected turn of events. "But… singing? Seriously? I thought her idea of a good time was alphabetizing her color-coded notes."

"Everyone has hidden depths, Joon-ho," I said, turning my attention back to him. "You, for example, have a surprising talent for making truly terrible fashion choices."

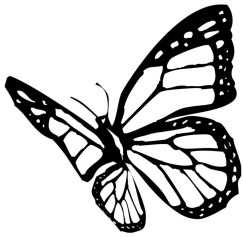
He scoffed. "Hey! This vintage band tee is a statement."

"A statement that screams 'I raided a thrift store in the dark'," I countered, my smirk widening. "The point is, I saw something in her. A yearning. A caged bird desperate to sing. And I simply… provided the key."

Joon-ho narrowed his eyes, a hint of suspicion creeping into his expression. "And you're doing this… why exactly?"

I clapped him on the shoulder, my smile unwavering. "Because, my friend, life is about… helping others discover their hidden potential. And maybe… just maybe… earning a few bragging rights along the way." The lie rolled off my tongue with practiced ease but he knew me that's why he look me with a knowing look.

Chapter 23: Lee Gyeong Hu



A lightness filled me as I walked home, the weight of unspoken dreams finally beginning to lift. The memory of my voice echoing in the quiet music room, the surprised faces of the teachers, and Ji-yoo's genuine applause played like a joyful melody in my mind. For the first time in what felt like forever, a genuine excitement bubbled within me.

I arrived home, the familiar grandeur of the house feeling less like a cage today. My stomach rumbled in protest, the earlier nerves having quelled my lunchtime appetite. I went to the dining room, the aroma of food filling the air. My mother was already seated at the polished mahogany table, a delicate plate of *Saengseon hoe* – thinly sliced raw fish with a vibrant array of vegetables and a spicy *gochujang* dipping sauce – in front of her.

"You're home, Gyeong-hu," she said, her tone measured, her gaze sharp as it always was. "How was school?"

"It was… fine, Mother," I replied, taking my seat and accepting the plate the maid offered. The *Saengseon hoe* looked delicious, the colors bright and inviting, but a knot of apprehension tightened in my stomach. I knew the inevitable inquisition about my studies was coming.

"Fine?" she echoed, her perfectly sculpted eyebrows arching slightly. "Just fine? Your mid-term results are approaching. I trust you are maintaining your focus?" Her gaze was unwavering, a constant reminder of the immense pressure she placed upon me.

"Yes, Mother. I've been studying diligently," I lied smoothly, my gaze fixed on the intricate patterns of the porcelain plate. The words came easily, a well-rehearsed script I had perfected over the years. The truth – the stolen moments of freedom, the exhilarating rush of singing, the unexpected connection with Ji-yoo – remained carefully concealed beneath the surface of my carefully constructed obedience.

"See that you do," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. "Your future depends on your academic success, Gyeong-hu. Extracurricular activities are a distraction, a frivolous waste of time." Her words were like a cold shower, momentarily dampening the warmth of my earlier joy.

"Of course, Mother," I replied, my voice carefully neutral. I picked at the *Saengseon hoe*, the delicate flavors momentarily lost on my preoccupied taste buds.

"I trust you haven't been engaging in any… unsavory activities with those… friends of yours?" she continued, her disapproval palpable. The unspoken disdain for So-mi and the others hung heavy in the air.

"No, Mother. I've been focused on my studies," I repeated, another lie sliding effortlessly from my lips. The guilt gnawed at me, a familiar ache in my chest, but the fierce desire to finally pursue my dream, even in secret, gave me a strange sort of resolve. I would navigate her expectations, weave through her

possessive control, and somehow, find a way to let my voice be heard, even if it meant living a double life. The taste of freedom, however fleeting, had been too intoxicating to let go of entirely.

As I finished the last delicate piece of *Saengseon hoe*, my mother regarded me with a rare, small smile. "Study well, Gyeong-hu," she said, the words a dismissal as much as an encouragement.

"Yes, Mother," I replied, offering a polite smile in return before gratefully retreating to the sanctuary of my room. The heavy door closed behind me with a soft click, shutting out the oppressive weight of her expectations, at least for a little while.

I sat down at my meticulously organized study table, the familiar textbooks and neatly stacked notes a stark contrast to the whirlwind of emotions swirling within me. I opened my Korean history book, the familiar text blurring slightly as my mind drifted back to the music room, to the feel of my voice finally unleashed.

"1392, establishment of the Joseon Dynasty," I read aloud, my voice clear but lacking its usual focused intonation. "1443, the creation of Hangul…" The dates and events swam before my eyes, the weight of centuries of Korean history feeling strangely insignificant compared to the fragile hope that now bloomed within me.

"1592, the Imjin War…" I continued, my voice growing louder, almost a chant as I tried to force the information into my preoccupied mind. "1636, the Qing invasion…" The rhythmic recitation was a familiar coping mechanism, a way to impose order on the chaos of my thoughts.

"1894, the Gabo Reforms!" I practically yelled, the sudden burst of volume startling even myself. My heart wasn't in it. The dates

felt lifeless, the historical figures distant and irrelevant. All I could think about was the melody that had poured out of me, the surprised faces of the teachers, and the warmth of Ji-yoo's approving gaze.

"1910, the annexation of Korea by Japan!" The words were almost a cry of frustration. My mind was a battlefield, the demands of my mother warring with the insistent pull of my newfound dream. How could I possibly focus on ancient dynasties and political upheavals when my own small world had just tilted on its axis? The singing competition, Ji-yoo's unexpected encouragement – it all felt like a fragile, precious secret I had to protect, a tiny spark of hope I couldn't let my mother extinguish. The dates of Korean history remained stubbornly elusive, lost in the louder, more insistent rhythm of the song in my heart.

The air was thick with the intoxicating perfume of a thousand roses, their velvety petals a riot of color – soft pink, ethereal blue, regal purple, sunny yellow, and even blooms of a deep, mysterious black. My red dress billowed softly around me, a vibrant contrast to the dreamlike landscape. My hair, unbound, cascaded around my shoulders, each strand feeling weightless, as if carried by an unseen breeze. It was a vision, a moment suspended outside the constraints of reality, a place where butterflies danced on the air and my heart felt lighter than it ever had before.

Then, the soft crunch of footsteps broke the idyllic silence. I turned, my breath catching in my throat. A figure stood in the distance, cloaked in black, his back to me. Yet, an inexplicable connection pulsed between us, a silent thread drawing my gaze, a sense of recognition that transcended the visual. It felt like… destiny.

"Who is there?" I called out, my voice barely a whisper in the fragrant air.

Slowly, deliberately, the man turned. And it was Ji-yoo.

My heart stopped. Not in a romantic flutter, but in a sudden, jarring halt, as if time itself had seized. He didn't resemble the benevolent figures of religious paintings, the gentle deities of a celestial realm. Instead, there was a stark, almost dangerous beauty about him, a captivating darkness that echoed the descriptions of fallen angels, the handsome devils whispered about in ancient texts.

Ji-yoo took a step towards me, his gaze intense, unwavering. An invisible force compelled me forward, my feet moving almost of their own accord, closing the distance between us in this surreal, rose-filled dreamscape. The air crackled with an unspoken energy, a silent acknowledgment of a connection that felt both inevitable and terrifying.

My gaze fell upon his hand, and there it was – a single, vibrant red rose, a stark anomaly in the kaleidoscope of other hues surrounding us. Every shade imaginable bloomed in this strange paradise, yet only he held the crimson one.

Ji-yoo’s hand, gentle yet possessive, traced the curve of my cheek, then moved to my hair, his touch sending shivers down my spine. I looked up at him, my breath caught in my throat. He carefully tucked the red rose just above my ear, the velvety petals brushing against my skin.

He leaned in close, his breath warm against my temple, and whispered, his voice a low, intoxicating murmur, "My butterfly with a rose."

My heart forgot its usual rhythm, fluttering erratically against my ribs. His hand moved to my waist, pulling me closer, his touch sending a wave of unexpected heat through me. And then, his lips were on mine, a deep, consuming kiss that stole the very air from my lungs. My senses reeled, the scent of roses mingling with his intoxicating nearness. My heart pounded with a frantic urgency, a desperate longing I had never dared to acknowledge.

Suddenly, the vibrant colors dissolved, the intoxicating scent faded, the warmth vanished. I gasped, my eyes snapping open. I was slumped over my study table, the harsh light of my desk lamp illuminating the open pages of my history book. There was no red dress, no field of roses, no Ji-yoo. Just the sterile reality of my room.

My hand instinctively went to my hair, searching for the phantom weight of the rose, finding nothing but the tangled strands. The dream, so vivid, so intensely real, had vanished, leaving behind only a lingering echo of his touch, his words.

A strange heat bloomed in my core, a heavy, unfamiliar sensation. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, a dampness against my skin. My panties… they were wet. The intensity of the dream, the forbidden kiss, the possessive whisper – it had all stirred something deep within me, a primal awakening I hadn't known existed. The devil in my dream had left his mark, not just in my memory, but in the undeniable stirring of my own body.

I closed my history book with a soft thud, the weight of the heavy volume a poor substitute for the lingering sensation of Ji-yoo's touch. A sigh escaped my lips, a silent acknowledgment of the dream's lingering impact. My heart still pounded a frantic rhythm against my ribs, and the unfamiliar heat between my legs was

an undeniable reminder of the forbidden intimacy my subconscious had conjured.

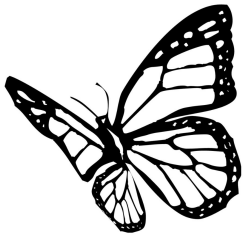
A subtle friction against my skin drew my attention downwards. My panties were indeed damp, a physical manifestation of the dream's potent imagery. Then, a memory, sharp and vivid, flashed through my mind: the chaotic scene at Velmora Mall, the accidental tumble, his hand briefly, searingly, pressed against my breast, his lips a breath away from mine. A nervous lick escaped my own lips, the phantom sensation of his nearness sending another shiver through me.

I shook my head, as if the physical movement could dispel the lingering effects of the dream and the resurfaced memory. *It was just a dream. An accident.* I tried to reason with myself, to regain control over the unruly emotions that Ji-yoo seemed to effortlessly stir within me, even in my sleep.

But then, I couldn't deny the persistent flutter in my stomach, a sensation akin to a thousand tiny wings beating against my insides. Butterflies. That's what they felt like. The same butterflies that had danced in the rose-filled dream, the same unsettling yet undeniably thrilling sensation that always seemed to accompany thoughts of Ji-yoo.

He was a walking contradiction, a beautiful devil who both terrified and intrigued me. He was the rule-breaker, the one who dared to defy expectations, the one who had seen the sadness I tried so hard to hide. And now, he was invading my dreams, stirring desires I didn't understand, leaving me with a dampness between my legs and a flock of butterflies taking flight within me. What was happening to me? This wasn't just a fleeting infatuation. This felt… different. Dangerous. And undeniably real.

Chapter 24: Lee Gyeong Hu



I lay on my bed, staring at the intricate patterns of the ceiling, Ji-yoo's voice echoing in my mind, the gruff endearment, "Shut up, idiot." A soft laugh escaped my lips, a sound filled with a strange mix of fondness and exasperation. I turned my gaze away from the ceiling, a new memory surfacing – his face close to mine, his voice a low murmur, "But what's the matter, little butterfly? Why so sad?" The way he had called me butterfly… that moment, suspended in the quiet intensity of the garden, replayed in my mind.

Suddenly, the shrill ring of the cordless phone on my side table shattered the silence. I sat up, a jolt of surprise pulling me from my reverie, and reached for the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello, my daughter," a warm, familiar voice filled my ear, and a wide smile instantly spread across my face. It was my father.

"Father! Hello! How are you doing? Great? I was missing you so much, and you know, a lot of things have happened, and I can't wait to tell you all of them!" My voice was bubbling with excitement, a stark contrast to the quiet contemplation of moments before.

"Okay, okay, take a breath, my little songbird," he chuckled, his voice a comforting balm. "I'm here, not going anywhere. Tell me everything."

I took a deep breath, trying to contain my eagerness. "How are you, Father?"

"I'm fine, my Gyeong-hu, and so happy to hear you sounding so… vibrant. What has put such a spring in your step?" he asked, a hint of playful curiosity in his tone.

"Oh, Father, you won't believe it!" I exclaimed, the words tumbling out in a rush. "There's a singing competition at school, and… and I took part in it!"

A beat of silence hung in the air. "Hello, Father? Are you there?"

He finally spoke, his voice laced with a mixture of surprise and amusement. "You took part in singing? And… your mother let you? That's… something new in her playbook."

A sigh escaped my lips. "No, Father," I confessed, the excitement in my voice dimming slightly. "I… I didn't tell her."

He chuckled, a warm, knowing sound that always made me feel understood. "So, my Gyeong-hu is finally learning how to live a little? Huh?"

A genuine smile spread across my face. "Yeah, maybe. But all the credit for this goes to a friend."

My father's tone shifted, a note of curiosity entering his voice. "A friend? Which friend?"

I lay back on my bed, gazing up at the ceiling, a soft smile playing on my lips, the receiver pressed against my ear. "He's

my senior. He's the one who… who made me bunk school for the first time, remember? I told you about that day."

He sighed, a sound I could somehow *hear* him smiling through. "Tell me more about this friend of yours, my little explorer."

I smiled wider. "Father, he's… he's the reckless boy in school. Always fighting, fighting, and just more fighting. But…" I paused, a sudden image of his intense grey eyes flashing in my mind. "But… he sees through me. He knows what I want the most. He gave me friends… and a taste of freedom. He's… different."

.My father's voice softened, a hint of concern underlying his gentle tone. "So… you're in love, aren't you?"

The question jolted me back to reality. "No! Ah, no! I… I love him… no, I mean, I hate him! No, I mean… I love him as a friend!" I stammered, the words tumbling out in a confused jumble.

He chuckled again, a warm, knowing sound. "Oh, come on, my Gyeong-hu. You know I'm a cool dad. No need to lie to me."

"No, Father, really!" I insisted, my cheeks flushing. "And second… I, umm… I don't know about his feelings, and I don't want to rush into anything."

"Gyeong-hu, look into his eyes, because eyes never lie," my father said softly, his voice carrying a weight of wisdom.

I nodded, a part of me acknowledging the truth in his words. Ji-yoo's gaze did hold something… intense, something that went beyond casual interaction. But the fear of misinterpreting it, the ingrained habit of protecting my own vulnerable heart, made me cling to my carefully constructed denial. "Yeah… you're right. But

I don't love him as a lover. So for now, let's just leave it at that." A thought struck me, a way to steer the conversation away from the treacherous territory of my feelings. "How's your wife? Is she doing well?"

A warm smile entered his voice. "Yeah, she's fine, my love. Busy as always with her art."

"Please say hello to her for me," I said, a genuine affection for my stepmother warming my tone.

"Of course. And what about your mother? Is she fine, or is she, as always, reminding you to study every waking moment?" he chuckled, the sound familiar and comforting.

"What do you think?" I replied, a small laugh escaping my lips.

He mirrored my amusement. "Like always, asking my brilliant daughter to bury herself in books."

I giggled. "You know her too well."

A more serious note entered his voice. "Be careful, my Gyeong-hu. Don't let her find out about your little taste of freedom and this competition. Choose your battles wisely."

"Yeah, I won't," I promised, the thrill of my secret rebellion tinged with a familiar apprehension.

"Alright, my love, I need to go now. Some work demands my attention. I'll call you again tomorrow," he said, his usual cheerful tone returning.

"Bye, Father," I replied, my smile widening.

"Good night and bye, my life," he said, his affection evident in every syllable.

"Bye," I whispered, a warmth spreading through me.

Then, a mischievous chuckle echoed through the receiver. "And take care of this… special friend of yours."

"He is *not* my special friend!" I retorted, the words coming out a little too quickly, a little too defensively. But it was too late. The line went dead, leaving me with the lingering warmth of my father's love and the undeniable, unsettling truth of Ji-yoo's growing presence in my thoughts. Special friend or not, he was certainly occupying a significant space in my mind, a space filled with stolen glances, whispered words, and the lingering heat of a dream.

Chapter 25: Kim Ji Yoo

"Hey dude, you were saying something about that 'Happy End' cassette?" Joon-ho asked, his eyes gleaming with anticipation, a familiar blend of mischief and teenage curiosity.

Dong-hyun, ever the eager participant, turned to me, his expression hopeful. "Yeah, you mentioned you actually had it?"

"Yes, I do have it," I confirmed, a slight smirk playing on my lips. That particular film was legendary in our circle, more for its scandalous reputation than its actual cinematic merit.

"Can you give me the cassette?" Joon-ho pressed, his hand outstretched in a mock-begging gesture.

Dong-hyun chimed in quickly, not wanting to be left out. "Look, bro, I've been dying to see it too!"

I held up a hand, silencing their eager pleas. "Okay, okay, okay. You guys can take it."

Their faces instantly brightened. "Seriously?" they exclaimed in unison.

"Seriously," I confirmed, then added, a mischievous glint in my eyes, "But you have to come with me to my place to get it."

"Deal!" they both shouted, their earlier impatience forgotten in their excitement.

I grabbed my helmet, a sleek, black Shoei, a recent indulgence that Joon-ho always envied. My ride was a Honda CBR600F4, a beast that purred with controlled power. Joon-ho, ever the vintage enthusiast, hopped onto his beat-up but beloved Kawasaki Ninja ZX-9R. Dong-hyun, practical as always, straddled his reliable Yamaha YZF-R1.

We roared out of the school parking lot, the engines a symphony of teenage rebellion, and sped towards my house.

As we walked into the living room, the familiar scent of aged wood and expensive cigars filled the air. Harabeoji, my grandfather, was ensconced in his favorite armchair, a half-empty glass of amber liquid swirling in his hand.

"Hello," Dong-hyun, Joon-ho, and I chorused, bowing slightly in respect.

Harabeoji looked up, a twinkle in his eye. "Ah, you're home, Ji-yoo?" he asked, his gaze then settling on my companions. "And you've brought your two monkeys with you."

Joon-ho clutched his chest dramatically. "We are here to pay our respects to the esteemed elder, Grandfather, and you wound us with such harsh words! Monkeys, you say?"

Dong-hyun joined in, feigning offense. "Not fair, sir. Not fair at all."

Harabeoji chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound. "Oh, I called you monkeys, did I? Well, the biggest monkey of the lot is always Ji-yoo."

I burst into laughter, unable to contain myself. "Come on, old man, you started again?"

Dong-hyun, ever the instigator, chimed in, "He's got a point, Grandfather."

Joon-ho clutched his stomach, tears welling in his eyes as he tried to stifle his laughter. "I… I can't… breathe!"

Harabeoji took a long sip of his drink, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Monkeys, yes. Especially you two," he gestured towards Joon-ho and Dong-hyun with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Always causing trouble, chasing skirts, and making enough noise to wake the dead."

Joon-ho, recovering from his laughing fit, shot back, "We prefer the term 'enthusiastic connoisseurs of life,' sir. And our vocal projections are merely a testament to our vibrant spirits."

Dong-hyun nodded vigorously. "Exactly! We're bringing joy to the world, one loud motorcycle ride at a time."

Harabeoji snorted. "Joy? You sound like a swarm of angry hornets trapped in a tin can." He then turned his attention to me, his expression softening slightly. "Ji-yoo, my clever grandson. Always so quiet. Too quiet sometimes. You're not plotting anything nefarious with these two hooligans, are you?"

"Grandfather, we were just going to watch a… documentary," I said smoothly, trying to suppress a smile at Joon-ho and Dong-hyun's indignant expressions.

Harabeoji's eyes narrowed. "A 'documentary,' you say? About what? The mating rituals of particularly loud primates?"

Joon-ho choked back a laugh, while Dong-hyun coughed loudly, pretending to clear his throat.

Harabeoji chuckled, clearly enjoying our discomfort. "Alright, alright. I'll let you and your 'documentary' be. But first, Ji-yoo. A challenge." He gestured towards the antique chessboard in the corner of the room, its ivory pieces gleaming under the soft lamplight. "A game. Just you and me. Unless you're afraid of an old man's rusty skills?"

My eyebrows rose. Harabeoji was a formidable chess player, his mind as sharp as a tack despite his age. "Afraid? Old man, I'm always up for a challenge. Especially against the reigning champion of the living room."

Joon-ho and Dong-hyun exchanged amused glances. They knew how seriously I took my chess matches with Harabeoji, even though I rarely won.

"Good," Harabeoji said, a predatory gleam in his eye. "Then let the battle commence. The monkeys can be our… enthusiastic commentators." He gestured towards the sofa with a flourish. "Make yourselves comfortable, boys. You might actually learn something about strategy and cunning."

Joon-ho and Dong-hyun plopped down on the sofa, already placing bets on who would win. The air in the living room, moments ago filled with boisterous laughter, now crackled with a quiet anticipation as Harabeoji and I settled in for our traditional chess showdown.

The ivory pieces felt cool and smooth beneath my fingertips as I arranged them on the aged board. Harabeoji, his eyes sharp and focused, mirrored my movements. The usual playful banter

ceased, replaced by a tense silence broken only by the soft clicking of the pieces as we made our opening moves.

The game unfolded slowly, each move deliberate and considered. Harabeoji, with his decades of experience, employed his usual patient strategy, building a solid defense while probing for weaknesses in my attack. I, however, played with a more aggressive flair, pushing my pawns forward, trying to create openings and gain a strategic advantage.

Joon-ho and Dong-hyun watched with rapt attention, occasionally whispering their observations and predictions. "Ji-yoo's got a strong attack going," Joon-ho murmured, leaning forward. "But Harabeoji's defense is like a fortress."

The middle game was a fierce battle of wits. I managed to capture one of Harabeoji's knights, a small victory that fueled my determination. But he retaliated swiftly, taking one of my rooks in a cunning counter-attack. The tension in the room thickened, the weight of each move palpable.

As the game progressed, I found myself in a surprisingly advantageous position. My queen, supported by a bishop, had Harabeoji's king cornered. Victory was within my grasp. I could see the path to checkmate, the culmination of my carefully planned strategy.

My hand hovered over my queen, ready to deliver the decisive blow. But then, I looked at Harabeoji. His brow was furrowed in concentration, a rare hint of strain on his usually jovial face. He wasn't just my grandfather. He had been a constant in my life, a source of unwavering support and love, especially during the times my parents were away. He was a mentor, a confidant, a friend who treated Joon-ho and Dong-hyun like his own

grandsons. The thought of defeating him, of dimming that spark in his eyes, gave me pause.

With a barely perceptible hesitation, I moved my queen to a less threatening square, a move that still maintained a strong position but offered Harabeoji a sliver of hope. The game continued, the momentum subtly shifting. Harabeoji, sensing the change, seized the opportunity, his strategic brilliance shining through. He slowly but surely turned the tide, his experienced maneuvering trapping my pieces one by one.

Finally, with a quiet sigh, I acknowledged defeat. "Checkmate, Old man," I said, offering him a genuine smile.

Harabeoji's face lit up, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "Ah, Ji-yoo, you played a good game, a very good game. You almost had me there."

Joon-ho and Dong-hyun erupted in applause. "Wow, Grandfather!" Joon-ho exclaimed, his eyes wide with admiration. "Ji-yoo is the best chess player in our group, and you beat him! You're incredible! We're your biggest fans!"

Dong-hyun nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah! You're a legend, sir! A true chess master!"

Harabeoji chuckled, a knowing glint in his eyes as he watched us rise. "Now go on, boys. Enjoy your… documentary. Oh, I mean, 'Happy End'," he said, the emphasis on the title dripping with playful sarcasm.

I couldn't help but chuckle. He knew exactly what kind of "documentary" we were planning to watch. He always had a way of seeing right through me, a lifetime of shared moments

creating an unspoken understanding between us. A smirk tugged at the corner of my lips. "Alright, old man. As you wish."

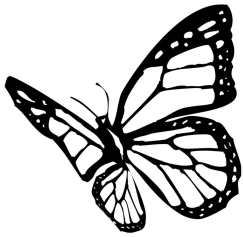
Joon-ho and Dong-hyun, eager to get to the forbidden cinematic experience, practically bounced on their heels as I turned towards the stairs. Just as I took the first step, Harabeoji's voice, though softer now, stopped me.

"And Ji-yoo," he said, his gaze direct and surprisingly serious. "Next time… don't show me any sympathy in chess. It's my dream to finally lose to you, fair and square."

A genuine smile spread across my face. He knew. He always knew. He had seen the almost imperceptible hesitation, the slight shift in my strategy. He understood that my "defeat" had been a conscious choice, a small act of affection disguised as a clumsy move.

"I'll keep that in mind,Old man," I replied, my voice filled with warmth. I knew that the next time we played, I would still find it hard to truly defeat him, not out of pity, but out of the deep love and respect I held for the man who was my anchor, my confidant, my everything. With a final nod, I turned and headed upstairs, Joon-ho and Dong-hyun practically tripping over themselves in their eagerness to follow. The "Happy End" cassette awaited, but the quiet understanding I shared with Harabeoji lingered, a far more meaningful connection than any scandalous movie could ever provide.

Chapter 26: Lee Gyeong Hu



The next day at school was a whirlwind. As soon as I stepped through the gates, So-mi and Hye-jin practically pounced on me, their eyes wide with excited curiosity.

"Hey, Gyeong-hu! Is it true? What we heard? You auditioned for the singing competition at school?" So-mi blurted out, her usual cool demeanor momentarily forgotten in her eagerness.

Hye-jin chimed in, her voice a mix of surprise and genuine delight. "Yeah! We heard whispers. Gyeong-hu, you can also sing?" She looked genuinely astonished, as if I had suddenly revealed a secret identity.

A shy smile touched my lips. I nodded, a small thrill coursing through me at finally sharing my secret passion with my friends.

Just then, a familiar voice drawled from behind me. "Yes, she can. And trust me, she's the best singer you'll ever hear."

So-mi and Hye-jin both turned, their eyes widening further as they took in Ji-yoo, leaning casually against the nearby wall, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. They looked back at me, their expressions now a mixture of utter surprise and burgeoning excitement. The news, it seemed, was spreading like wildfire,

and the reactions of my friends were both validating and a little overwhelming.

So-mi's jaw practically hit the ground. "Ji-yoo? You knew?" She looked at me, then back at him, her head swiveling like she was watching a particularly intense tennis match. "Since when were you two keeping secrets about hidden vocal talents?"

Hye-jin, ever the dramatic one, gasped. "This is like a K-drama plot twist! The quiet, studious girl has a secret passion, and the resident bad boy is her secret supporter!" She clutched her chest dramatically. "My heart can't handle this!"

Ji-yoo just smirked, pushing off the wall and sauntering towards us. "Please. 'Secret supporter' makes me sound like some kind of creepy stalker with a hidden agenda. I just have exceptionally good taste in musical talent." He winked at me, a gesture that still sent a confusing flutter through my stomach.

"Oh, so now you're a music critic?" I retorted, trying to sound unimpressed but failing miserably. "Last week, I distinctly remember you saying your favorite genre was 'anything with a good beat to make my bike sound cooler.'"

Joon-ho, who had just joined our little group, snorted with laughter. "Burn!" he exclaimed, giving me a high-five. "Savage level: Gyeong-hu just roasted you with her library voice."

Ji-yoo feigned offense, clutching his chest. "Ouch, princess. Those quiet ones are always the most vicious. It's the element of surprise." He then grinned, completely unfazed. "But in all seriousness, you were amazing at the audition. Even I was impressed, and you know how high my standards are." He winked again, and this time, I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips.

"High standards?" I scoffed playfully. "Your high standards involve judging the structural integrity of abandoned buildings for potential skateboarding spots."

Dong-hyun, who had also joined us, chuckled. "She's got you there, dude."

Ji-yoo just shrugged, his smirk never faltering. "Hey, a good ollie requires a solid foundation. Just like a good song requires a solid… Gyeong-hu." He nudged my shoulder with his. "See? I can be poetic when the situation calls for it."

"More like desperate for compliments," I shot back, but the teasing tone in my voice betrayed my amusement. Maybe this whole singing competition wouldn't be so terrifying after all, especially with this unlikely group of friends – and the undeniably intriguing presence of Ji-yoo – by my side.

The shrill, insistent ring of the first class bell cut through our playful banter, a stark reminder that even amidst unexpected friendships and burgeoning dreams, academic duties still loomed. A collective groan rippled through our little group.

"Ugh, back to the land of quadratic equations," Hye-jin lamented, making a face.

So-mi sighed dramatically. "At least history is slightly less mind-numbing than calculus."

Dong-hyun just shrugged. "Another day, another chance to nap discreetly in the back row."

I gathered my books, a sense of reluctant responsibility settling over me. "Well, duty calls. I guess even aspiring singers and

reformed rebels have to attend class." I glanced at Ji-yoo, a small smile lingering on my lips.

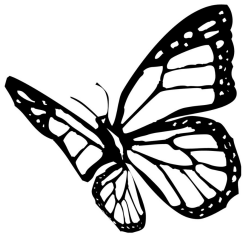
He just leaned against the wall, his usual laid-back demeanor firmly in place. "Go on, princess. Go impress those teachers with your… knowledge. I'll be here, plotting my escape from the tyranny of textbooks." He winked.

"Try not to get into too much trouble before the next bell," I retorted, a playful warning in my voice.

"Trouble? Me? Never," he said, his expression the very picture of innocent denial, which, knowing Ji-yoo, was a blatant lie.

With a final exchange of amused glances and mumbled farewells, we dispersed, each heading towards the respective battlegrounds of our morning classes. As I walked towards my classroom, the earlier excitement about the singing competition still bubbled beneath the surface of my more dutiful demeanor. The image of Ji-yoo's surprising support, coupled with the surprised delight of So-mi and Hye-jin, warmed me from the inside out. Even the prospect of another hour dissecting the nuances of Korean grammar felt a little less daunting, carrying with me the secret knowledge of the song that now lived within me, waiting for its moment to be heard.

Chapter 27: Lee Gyeong Hu



The weight of the history textbook in my bag felt heavier than usual as I walked into the classroom. Today was the day – the mid-term history test that had been looming over my head for weeks. My mother's constant reminders to "focus, Gyeong-hu, your future depends on this" echoed in my mind, adding another layer of pressure to the already tense atmosphere in the room.

Mr. Kim, the notoriously strict history teacher, began distributing the papers, his expression as stern as ever. A hush fell over the class as we all received the dreaded sheets. I took a deep breath, trying to recall the endless dates, names, and events I had diligently memorized.

I scanned the first question, my brow furrowing slightly. It was about the Goryeo Dynasty's land reform policies – a topic I had studied extensively. Yet, the way the question was phrased, with its subtle nuances and unfamiliar terminology, threw me off balance. A knot of unease tightened in my stomach.

I moved on to the next question, about the causes of the Imjin War. Again, the familiar facts were there, but presented in a way that felt… alien. It was as if the test was written in a code I couldn't quite decipher. My mind, usually a well-organized

repository of historical knowledge, felt strangely blank, a swirling fog of half-remembered dates and disconnected events.

Panic began to set in, a cold dread creeping through me. This was unprecedented. History was my strongest subject, the one area where I consistently excelled, the one thing that always earned my mother's rare approval. Yet, looking at this test, I felt completely lost, adrift in a sea of historical complexities I suddenly couldn't navigate. The carefully constructed walls of my academic confidence began to crumble, replaced by a terrifying sense of inadequacy. For the first time, the pressure to succeed, the fear of disappointing my mother, had seemingly paralyzed my mind.

My mind raced, desperately grasping at fragments of information, trying to piece together coherent answers. I reread the questions, willing the familiar facts to resurface, but the harder I tried, the more elusive they became. Dates and names blurred together, causes and effects intertwined in a confusing mess. It was like trying to catch smoke with bare hands – the knowledge was there, somewhere, but I couldn't seem to grasp it, to bring it to the forefront of my panicked mind.

The minutes ticked by with agonizing slowness, each second amplifying my growing sense of failure. I scribbled down a few disjointed phrases, half-formed sentences that barely resembled coherent answers. My usual meticulous handwriting became shaky and uneven, mirroring the turmoil within me.

Finally, Mr. Kim's stern voice cut through the tense silence. "Time's up. Pens down, please." A collective sigh, a mixture of relief and resignation, swept through the classroom. My own sigh was heavy with disappointment and a gnawing sense of dread. I hadn't even attempted half the questions.

Mr. Kim began collecting the papers, his gaze impassive as he moved from desk to desk. I handed in my test, the lightness of the paper in my hand a stark contrast to the heavy weight of failure in my chest.

The next few hours crawled by. A cloud of anxiety hung over me, overshadowing even the small thrill of anticipation for the upcoming singing competition. The thought of facing my mother with anything less than stellar results filled me with a cold dread.

It wasn't until third period, during our homeroom session, that Mr. Kim finally announced the history test results. A hush fell over the class once again, the usual morning chatter replaced by nervous anticipation. He called out names one by one, stating the corresponding scores. My heart pounded in my ears as I waited for my turn.

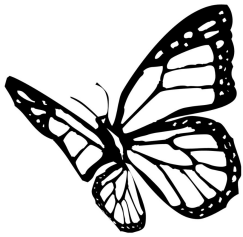
When my name was finally called, his tone was neutral, devoid of the usual praise I had come to expect. "Lee Gyeong-hu… you passed."

The words hung in the air, a stark and disappointing reality. Just passed. Not topped. Not even close to the top. A wave of shame washed over me. It was the first time in my academic career that I hadn't excelled, hadn't met the impossibly high standards my mother had set. The whispers around me, the subtle glances of my classmates, felt like silent accusations. The joy of the singing competition suddenly felt distant and insignificant, overshadowed by the looming storm of my mother's inevitable disappointment.

It wasn't fear that gripped me at the news of just passing. It was a profound sadness. I had always been the best, the one to set the curve, the embodiment of diligence and academic excellence.

My identity, in so many ways, was tied to that unwavering success. This… this felt like a fundamental failure, a crack in the carefully constructed foundation of my life. I craved freedom, yes, the exhilarating taste of it had been intoxicating. But not this way, not at the cost of the one thing I had always been good at. This wasn't rebellion; it was just… a disheartening stumble. The joy of the singing competition felt muted, tainted by this unexpected academic misstep.

Chapter 28: Lee Gyeong Hu



Emerging from the classroom felt like stepping out into a world that had suddenly tilted on its axis. My thoughts were a heavy, swirling vortex of disappointment and a strange sense of disorientation. The weight of not excelling, of simply *passing*, pressed down on me, a stark contrast to the lightness I had felt just days before. The corridors, usually bustling with students, seemed muted and blurry through the film of my own dejection.

Lost in this internal landscape of self-reproach, I barely registered the approaching footsteps until a strong hand clamped firmly over my mouth, yanking me abruptly into a dark, silent storage room tucked away behind the science labs. My heart leaped into my throat, a strangled gasp caught behind the restricting hand. Panic flared, my eyes wide with a primal fear as I struggled against the unexpected force.

Then, the familiar scent of his cologne, a subtle mix of something woodsy and something undeniably *him*, registered in my frantic mind. Through the dim light filtering from the crack beneath the door, I saw the sharp angles of his jawline, the familiar intensity in his eyes. Ji-yoo.

His hand slowly, cautiously, slid away from my mouth. I stared at him, my breath coming in ragged gasps, the initial fear slowly

giving way to a bewildering mix of relief and a nervous anticipation. A small, involuntary smile touched my lips. Even in this bizarre, slightly alarming situation, his presence held a strange comfort.

He stepped closer, his gaze searching mine, the playful smirk he often wore replaced by a look of genuine concern. "Princess? What's wrong? You looked like you'd just seen a ghost back there." His voice was low, a hushed murmur in the confined space.

I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice amidst the lingering shock. "It's… the history test. I… I just passed." The words felt heavy, laden with the weight of my perceived failure.

His eyebrows furrowed, a hint of confusion in his eyes. "Just passed? What's the big deal? A pass is a pass, right?"

"No," I whispered, the word carrying the weight of years of ingrained expectation. "Not for me. I always… I always top." The admission felt pathetic, a childish clinging to a standard that suddenly felt impossibly distant.

He stepped even closer, his hand gently cupping my cheek, his thumb stroking the soft skin beneath my eye. His touch was surprisingly tender, a stark contrast to his usual rebellious demeanor. "Hey," he murmured, his gaze softening, his grey eyes holding a depth of understanding I hadn't expected. "It's just one test, princess. It doesn't define you."

"But… my mother…" The words trailed off, the unspoken fear hanging heavy in the air between us.

He sighed, his thumb still tracing gentle circles on my cheek. "Forget your mother for a second, okay? What's *really* bothering

you?" His gaze was insistent, urging me to look beyond the immediate disappointment.

I looked up at him, really looked at him, and saw not the reckless rule-breaker, but someone who seemed to genuinely care, someone who saw past the perfect facade I usually presented. The dam of my carefully controlled emotions began to crack.

"I… I don't know," I whispered, my voice trembling slightly. "It just… it feels like I failed. Like I let everyone down. Like… like maybe I'm not as smart as everyone thinks I am." The vulnerability of the admission hung in the air, raw and exposed.

He leaned closer, his forehead resting gently against mine. The darkness of the room seemed to recede, replaced by the intense connection between us. His breath was warm against my skin. "Hey," he repeated, his voice even softer now, a low rumble that resonated deep within me. "You are the smartest person I know, princess. You ace every single damn thing without even breaking a sweat. One little slip-up doesn't change that."

His words, simple yet sincere, were a balm to my wounded pride. The unexpected tenderness of his touch, the genuine concern in his eyes, chipped away at the wall of my self-disappointment.

He tilted his head slightly, his gaze dropping to my lips. The air in the small, confined room crackled with a sudden, palpable tension. The scent of dust and forgotten equipment faded, replaced by the intoxicating nearness of him. My heart began to beat faster, a nervous flutter that had nothing to do with fear anymore.

His other hand found my waist, his touch sending a shiver down my spine. He pulled me closer, his body brushing against mine,

a spark igniting in the close proximity. My breath hitched in my throat. The disappointment of the test seemed to recede, replaced by a different kind of longing, a yearning for something I didn't fully understand but felt with an undeniable intensity.

His eyes, dark and searching in the dim light, held mine captive. Time seemed to slow, the world outside the dusty storage room fading into oblivion. It was just us, suspended in this silent, charged space, the unspoken emotions swirling between us like a tangible thing. The air grew thick with anticipation, a silent question hanging between us, a question that had nothing to do with history tests or academic expectations, but everything to do with the unexpected connection that had blossomed in the most unlikely of circumstances.

His gaze lingered on my lips, the air between us thick with an unspoken promise. My breath hitched, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs. I closed my eyes almost instinctively, a silent invitation, a surrender to the magnetic pull that drew me towards him. I could feel his breath warm against my skin, the anticipation building to a fever pitch.

Then, just as his lips were about to brush mine, a sudden shift. I felt his hands, which had been so tender just moments before, drop from my waist and cheek. A cool draft replaced the warmth of his nearness.

I opened my eyes, a bewildered question in my gaze. Ji-yoo had stepped back, a conflicted expression flickering across his face. The intense connection that had held us captive just moments ago seemed to dissipate, leaving a sudden, aching void.

He ran a hand through his hair, his usual confident demeanor slightly ruffled. "Princess," he murmured, his voice a low, almost

hesitant rumble. He didn't meet my eyes, his gaze fixed somewhere over my shoulder. "We… we shouldn't…"

The words hung in the air, a cold splash of reality against the warmth of the moment. Confusion warred with a sharp pang of disappointment. I was left breathless, not from the near kiss, but from the abrupt withdrawal, the unspoken barrier that had suddenly sprung up between us.

He took another step back, putting more distance between us. The dim light of the storage room seemed to amplify the awkward silence. "I… I just wanted to make sure you were okay," he said, his voice regaining some of its usual casual tone, though a subtle undercurrent of something else lingered. "About the test. Don't let it get to you."

And then, as quickly and unexpectedly as he had pulled me into the room, he was gone. He turned and slipped out the door, leaving me standing alone in the dusty silence, my heart still racing, my lips still tingling with the phantom sensation of his nearness, and my mind reeling from the abrupt and inexplicable retreat. The air where he had stood still held the faint trace of his cologne, a cruel reminder of the intense moment that had almost been, leaving me utterly breathless and more confused than ever.

Emerging from the dimly lit storage room felt like stepping back into a distorted reality. The hallway, now bustling with students changing classes, seemed overly bright and loud. I tried to compose myself, to smooth down my rumpled uniform, but the lingering echo of Ji-yoo's near kiss, and his sudden retreat, left me feeling disoriented and strangely exposed.

Just as I was trying to gather my scattered thoughts, I bumped squarely into Hye-jin. Her eyes widened slightly at my flustered appearance, and then her gaze flicked towards the storage room door, just as Ji-yoo disappeared around the corner at the far end of the hallway. A playful smirk immediately spread across her face, her eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

"Well, well, well," she drawled, her tone laced with amusement. "Look what the cat dragged out of the forbidden closet. And who was that dashing figure I just saw making a hasty exit?" She looped her arm through mine, her grip surprisingly firm, and steered me away from the crowded hallway. "Come on, my friend. Spill the tea. We need to debrief. Stat."

She led me to the deserted school cafeteria, the echoing silence a stark contrast to the earlier chaos. We settled into a secluded booth, the vinyl seats cool beneath us. Hye-jin leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"So," she began, her voice conspiratorial. "Ji-yoo, you, and a dark, secluded room. My imagination is running wild. What exactly was going on in there?"

My cheeks flushed despite my attempts to remain nonchalant. "Nothing! I just… I wasn't feeling well, and he… he just helped me find a quiet place to rest for a moment." The lie sounded flimsy even to my own ears.

Hye-jin raised a skeptical eyebrow, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "Uh-huh. And I'm dating Brad Pitt. Seriously, Gyeong-hu, you looked like you'd just narrowly escaped a passionate tango in the dark."

"It wasn't like that," I insisted, my voice a little too high-pitched. "He was just… being a friend."

"A friend who looks at you like he wants to devour you whole?" Hye-jin countered, her gaze sharp and perceptive. "Come on, Gyeong-hu. We're your friends. You can tell us."

I hesitated, the memory of his intense gaze, the almost-kiss, flooding back. The lie felt heavy on my tongue. I looked down at my hands, twisting them nervously in my lap.

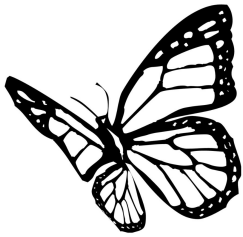
Hye-jin reached across the table and gently placed her hand over mine. Her expression softened, her playful demeanor replaced by a genuine warmth. "Gyeong-hu," she said softly. "It's okay. Whatever it is. But… you look at him differently too, you know. There's this… tension. Like two magnets that are trying really hard not to attract."

I finally looked up at her, my carefully constructed walls crumbling. The truth, the confusing, undeniable truth, hung in the air between us. Hye-jin's kind eyes held no judgment, only a gentle understanding.

She asked the question softly, the words barely a whisper. "You love him, right?"

The denial that had been so readily available just moments before caught in my throat. I opened my mouth to protest, to utter another flimsy lie, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, a slow, reluctant nod escaped me. The truth, finally spoken aloud, hung heavy and undeniable in the quiet of the deserted cafeteria,

Chapter 29: Lee Gyeong Hu



I told her everything.

A sigh escaped my lips, a silent acknowledgment of the truth I had just admitted. "I… I don't know if he feels the same way," I confessed, the vulnerability raw and exposed. "He's… complicated. One minute he's… surprisingly kind, and the next… he's back to being the aloof, untouchable Ji-yoo." The memory of his abrupt departure in the storage room still stung, a confusing contradiction to the intense moments we had shared.

Hye-jin squeezed my hand gently. "I get it. Boys can be walking enigmas wrapped in leather jackets. But… you like him, right? Like, *really* like him?"

I nodded again, the blush returning to my cheeks. There was no point in denying it now. The truth was out, a fragile butterfly fluttering in the open air.

Hye-jin's eyes brightened, a spark of her usual enthusiasm returning. "Okay, so we've established the 'you like him' part. Now for the million-dollar question: does he like you back? Honestly, Gyeong-hu, I've seen the way he looks at you sometimes. It's not the same way he looks at other girls."

"He calls me 'princess'," I murmured, the nickname a confusing mix of endearment and mockery. "And he… he helped me with the singing competition. But then… that moment in the storage room… it felt like something was about to happen, and then he just… backed away."

Hye-jin leaned forward, her expression thoughtful. "Exactly! The mixed signals are strong with this one. But think about it, Gyeong-hu. Why would he pull you into a secluded room like that in the first place? Why the sudden concern about your test? It's not exactly his MO to play the knight in shining armor."

A flicker of hope ignited within me, battling against the ingrained fear of misinterpreting his actions. "Maybe…"

Hye-jin grinned, her usual mischievous glint returning. "Maybe is good! Maybe means there's a chance! Look, we don't know for sure how he feels. He's Ji-yoo. Decoding his emotions is probably harder than understanding quantum physics. But…" She leaned in conspiratorially. "Don't you think we should try to find out? You like him, he's acting… strangely interested. What do we have to lose by trying to figure out what's going on in that gorgeous, chaotic brain of his?"

Hye-jin dramatically pulled a pair of oversized, heart-shaped sunglasses from her bag and perched them on her nose, despite the fact that we were indoors. She struck a pose, one hand on her hip, the other gesturing vaguely in the air like a seasoned strategist surveying a battlefield.

"Alright, Gyeong-hu, listen closely," she declared, her voice dropping to a mock-serious whisper, though the absurdity of her eyewear somewhat undermined the effect. "Operation: Decode

the Bad Boy is a go. And you, my dear friend, are Agent Butterfly."

I couldn't help but giggle at her theatrics. "Agent Butterfly?"

"Yes! You're delicate, yet you have hidden strength," she proclaimed, completely unfazed by my amusement. "And you flutter around Ji-yoo, captivating his attention without even trying. It's perfect!" She tapped her sunglasses knowingly. "Now, do as I say. We're going to embark on a series of carefully orchestrated… encounters."

I looked at her, a mixture of apprehension and excitement swirling within me. "Encounters?"

"Precisely!" Hye-jin exclaimed, her enthusiasm infectious. "Think of it as a scientific experiment, but with more flirting and significantly higher stakes. We'll observe his reactions, analyze his body language, and subtly probe his feelings. We'll leave no stone unturned in our quest to unravel the mystery that is Kim Ji-yoo heart… or whatever hardened muscle resides in its place."

She winked, the heart-shaped lenses glinting. "Mission: Love on the way. Prepare for launch, Agent Butterfly."

And because a tiny, hopeful part of me desperately wanted Hye-jin's outlandish theories to be true, because the memory of Ji-yoo's near kiss still lingered like a phantom touch, and because, let's face it, I was utterly clueless when it came to the enigmatic world of boys, I agreed. I nodded, a hesitant smile playing on my lips, ready to embark on "Operation: Decode the Bad Boy," led by the self-proclaimed love expert with heart-shaped sunglasses.

And because a tiny, hopeful part of me desperately wanted Hye-jin's outlandish theories to be true, because the memory of Ji-yoo's near kiss still lingered like a phantom touch, and because, let's face it, I was utterly clueless when it came to the enigmatic world of boys, I agreed. I nodded, a hesitant smile playing on my lips, ready to embark on "Operation: Decode the Bad Boy," led by the self-proclaimed love expert with heart-shaped sunglasses.

Why do I now look back on that decision with a sigh and a shake of my head, labeling it a moment of utter foolishness? Ah, my dear reader, the path to understanding the human heart, especially a heart as guarded and unpredictable as Kim Ji-yoo, is rarely a straight and easy one. The carefully orchestrated "encounters," the meticulous observations, the hopeful interpretations… they would soon lead me down a tangled road paved with mixed signals, misinterpreted glances, and a healthy dose of teenage delusion. The butterfly, it turned out, was about to flutter directly into a rather thorny rose bush. The lessons learned would be… memorable, to say the least. And the heart, well, the heart often has a mind of its own, stubbornly refusing to follow the carefully laid plans of well-meaning but ultimately misguided friends.

The next twelve days unfolded in a flurry of secret glances, hushed consultations with Hye-jin, and a nervous anticipation that buzzed beneath the surface of my usual routine. No one outside our small circle of So-mi and Dong-hyun suspected "Operation: Decode the Bad Boy" was in full swing. I continued to arrive at school in the back of our family's sleek black sedan, my driver, Mr. Kim (a different Mr. Kim, thankfully, from history), a silent guardian in the front.

The official list for the singing competition was posted, and my name was indeed on it. A thrill of pure joy shot through me, quickly followed by a fresh wave of nerves. Rehearsals began after school in the music room. I would find myself humming melodies during study breaks, my mind constantly replaying the song I had chosen – a melancholic ballad that resonated with the secret longings of my heart.

Ji-yoo's presence during this time was a confusing mix of his usual aloofness and unexpected moments of intense focus on me. He would sometimes lean against the doorway of the music room, observing my rehearsals with a quiet intensity that made my stomach flutter. Once, as I stumbled over a particularly difficult note, he simply said, "Feel it, princess. Don't just sing it." His words, though brief, unlocked something in me, and the emotion poured through the melody with a newfound depth.

Hye-jin, meanwhile, was in full "love expert" mode. Her attempts to "subtly probe" Ji-yoo's feelings often bordered on the absurd. She'd stage accidental "run-ins" where she'd loudly proclaim my virtues "Did you know Gyeong-hu can solve Rubik's Cubes blindfolded? A true intellectual!", or she'd try to gauge his reaction when another boy even glanced in my direction, often resulting in awkward stares and Ji-yoo's characteristic eye-rolls.

One particularly memorable "encounter" involved Hye-jin pretending to trip near Ji-yoo in the hallway, dramatically clutching his arm for balance while loudly exclaiming how "chivalrous" he was. Ji-yoo had simply raised an eyebrow and muttered something under his breath about "overacting drama queens."

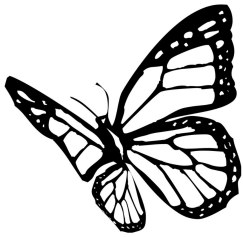
Despite Hye-jin's often comical tactics, there were moments that made my heart skip a beat. Once, during lunch, I was sketching

in my notebook, lost in thought, when I felt a shadow fall over my page. Ji-yoo was standing beside me, silently watching my drawing. He didn't say anything, just observed the delicate lines of a flower I was rendering. After a moment, he simply nodded, a small, almost imperceptible smile touching his lips, and walked away. It was a fleeting moment, but the quiet appreciation in his eyes lingered.

Another time, as I was leaving rehearsal late, I found him waiting by the school gates, leaning against his bike. "Need a ride, princess?" he asked casually, offering me his spare helmet. The unexpected offer sent a thrill through me, but the ever-present image of my waiting driver held me back. "No, thank you, Ji-yoo. My driver's here," I replied, a hint of regret in my voice. He just shrugged, a knowing glint in his eyes, as if he understood the invisible leash that tethered me.

Now, with only two days left until the competition, the nerves were reaching a fever pitch. My rehearsals were becoming more intense, the melody ingrained in my muscle memory. Hye-jin's "investigation" remained inconclusive, a confusing tapestry of indifferent shrugs and fleeting moments of undeniable interest from Ji-yoo. The mystery of his feelings remained stubbornly unsolved, leaving me in a state of nervous anticipation, both for the upcoming performance and for the enigma that was Kim Ji-yoo.

Chapter 30: Lee Gyeong Hu



I woke with a jolt, the remnants of a restless but joyful night clinging to me like a sweet dream. Sleep had been a fickle visitor, my mind buzzing with anticipation for the day ahead. Today was the day. The singing competition. A nervous energy coursed through me, a vibrant hum beneath my skin.

I headed to the washroom, the cool tiles a welcome sensation under my bare feet. The shower was quick and invigorating, washing away the last vestiges of sleep and replacing it with a sense of focused excitement. I donned my school uniform, the familiar fabric feeling different today, imbued with the significance of the event. My hair went up in a sleek, high ponytail, a style that felt both confident and a little bit daring. A swipe of creamy brown lipstick and a touch of pin blush added a subtle polish.

I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. Nervousness flickered in my eyes, a tiny tremor beneath the surface of my carefully composed expression. But overriding it was a genuine happiness, a quiet confidence in the song that lived within me.

Grabbing my bag, I headed downstairs for breakfast. The house was unusually quiet; my mother was already gone, likely immersed in her morning routine. Just as I reached the dining

room, the landline rang, its insistent jingle cutting through the silence. I picked up the receiver.

"Hey, princess, ready?" Ji-yoo's voice, low and familiar, filled my ear.

A wide smile bloomed on my face. "Always," I replied, the word carrying a lightness I hadn't felt in a long time.

"Are you nervous?" he asked, a hint of concern in his tone.

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "Yes, I am. But more than that… I'm confident. And happy." The words felt true, a genuine reflection of the mix of emotions swirling within me.

"That's my princess," he said softly, a warmth in his voice that made my heart do a little flip.

"Okay, I'm just about to have breakfast. I'll be at school soon," I said, eager to get there, to feel the energy of the day.

"Alright then. Bye," he said, the casual farewell carrying an unspoken understanding.

"Okay, bye," I replied, a lingering smile on my lips as the line went dead. The day had begun, and a sense of exhilarating anticipation filled me. Today, I would finally let my voice be heard.

I was halfway through my toast when Mr. Choi, my driver, rushed into the dining room, his face etched with worry. "Miss Lee Gyeong-hu!" he exclaimed, his voice tight with urgency.

I looked up, concern immediately mirroring his own. "Yes, Mr. Choi? What happened? You look worried." I stood up, my half-eaten breakfast forgotten.

He wrung his hands. "Miss, I… I can't take you to school today." His distress was palpable. "My wife… her labor pains started suddenly. I need to get to the hospital."

My own worry intensified. "Oh no! Mr. Choi, of course! You go. Don't worry about me. I'll get to school by myself." His relief was immediate.

He nodded quickly, gratitude flooding his features. "Thank you, Miss. Thank you so much." He turned and hurried out of the house.

I finished my breakfast quickly, my earlier excitement slightly tempered by Mr. Choi's emergency. After clearing the dishes, I grabbed my bag, slipped on my shoes, and started walking towards school. It was a pleasant fifteen-minute walk on a normal day.

As I walked, I saw a young boy a few houses down, clinging to his father's leg, tears streaming down his face, clearly not wanting to go to school. His father knelt down, offered him a chocolate bar, and like magic, the crying stopped. A small smile touched my lips at the simple solution.

I decided to take a shortcut, a quieter route that led past a small convenience store. As I walked by, an elderly man was struggling to open the door of his car. Suddenly, he clutched his chest and collapsed onto the ground. My heart lurched with panic. No one else was around.

"Oh no, sir! Are you okay?" I rushed towards him, but he was unresponsive, his face pale and contorted in pain. My mind raced. A phone booth! I spotted one just a few meters away, a relic from another era. My hands trembling, I fumbled with the coins and dialed the emergency number.

The wail of the ambulance siren grew louder, a piercing sound that sliced through the quiet suburban street. Paramedics jumped out, their movements swift and efficient. The old man was still clutching my hand, his grip surprisingly strong despite his distress.

A nurse, her expression calm but urgent, looked at me. "Miss, he seems to be holding on to you. Would you mind coming with us in the ambulance? It might help to keep him stable."

My heart sank a little as I glanced at my watch. The competition would be starting soon. But the thought of leaving this man alone, his life hanging in the balance, was impossible. "Okay," I said without hesitation, squeezing his hand gently.

I climbed into the back of the ambulance, the flashing lights casting an eerie glow. The paramedics worked quickly, attaching monitors and administering oxygen. The old man's grip on my hand remained tight, his eyes fluttering closed.

At the hospital, the atmosphere was a whirlwind of hushed urgency. Doctors and nurses moved with practiced precision. They quickly diagnosed a heart attack and began treatment. I sat in the waiting area, still clutching the old man's now-limp hand, relaying the events as they had unfolded.

When a doctor finally approached me, his expression serious, he asked, "Miss, what is your relationship to the patient?"

A wave of guilt washed over me. I wasn't related to him at all. But the image of his frail hand clutching mine, the desperate need in his eyes, flashed through my mind. "He… he's my grandfather," I said, the lie feeling heavy but necessary. In that moment, saving his life felt more important than any truth. I had

to stay, to make sure he was okay. The singing competition, my dreams – they would have to wait.

Chapter 31: Kim Ji Yoo

My gaze flicked to my watch again, the digital numbers a stark reminder of the dwindling time. Five minutes. Just five minutes until the competition was supposed to begin, and there was still no sign of her. Hye-jin, So-mi, and Dong-hyun were huddled together, their faces etched with worry, their hushed whispers filling the tense air backstage. But my anxiety eclipsed theirs tenfold.

Joon-ho, ever the oblivious one, finally noticed my restless pacing and the tight knot in my jaw. "Hey dude, chill out. What's with the long face? You look like you're about to face a firing squad."

I stopped pacing and glared at him, my worry making me sharper than intended. "She's not here, Joon-ho. The competition is about to start, and she's not here."

He shrugged, his usual nonchalant attitude firmly in place. "So? Maybe the little teacher's pet chickened out. It's a big stage."

My temper flared. "Don't call her that, Joon-ho. And this isn't about some stupid bet anymore. This is her dream. She deserves this." The words surprised even myself, the genuine conviction in my voice cutting through my usual cynicism.

I checked my watch again, the seconds ticking away like a death knell. "Something's wrong. She's never late. Not for anything important." A cold dread began to creep into my gut, a feeling far more potent than the mere annoyance of a delayed victory.

Joon-ho finally seemed to register the genuine worry in my eyes. He clapped a hand on my shoulder, his usual teasing demeanor replaced by a rare moment of sincerity. "Hey, man, don't freak out. She'll be here. Probably just got held up. You know how things are. Relax, okay?" But his words didn't quite reach the icy knot of unease that had settled within me. Where was she? What could possibly be keeping her? The image of her face, alight with nervous excitement just that morning, flashed through my mind, and the thought of her missing this, her dream slipping away, sent a wave of protectiveness crashing over me.

I saw Ms. Shin-ah, the stern-faced teacher in charge of the competition, gesturing for the first participant to take the stage. A surge of panic shot through me. I had to do something. I strode towards her, my urgency overriding my usual rebellious nonchalance.

"Ms. Shin-ah, please, I need just one minute of your time," I said, my voice uncharacteristically earnest.

She looked down at me, her expression wary, the familiar disdain for the school's resident troublemaker evident in her eyes. "Kim Ji-yoo. This is hardly the time for your usual recklessness."

"Please, just one minute. It's… it's about something serious. Life and death, almost," I insisted, the hyperbole born of genuine worry.

She sighed, a flicker of something unreadable in her gaze. "Fine," she conceded, gesturing for me to follow her to a quiet corner backstage. "What is it?"

"Ms. Shin-ah, you know Lee Gyeong-hu? The top student? She's also in this competition," I said quickly, my anxiety making my words tumble out.

She looked at me, her eyebrows slightly raised. "Yes, she is. So?"

"She's not here," I explained, my voice tight. "She's late. And Gyeong-hu is never late, especially not for something this important. I think… I think she might be in trouble. This is her dream, Ms. Shin-ah."

She glanced at her watch, her expression softening slightly, though a hint of professional rigidity remained. "The competition is about to start. I can't just hold things up."

"Please, ma'am," I pleaded, a desperation creeping into my voice. "Just… just do something. Please. You're the only one who might be able to help."

She looked at me, a flicker of something akin to understanding in her eyes. "Alright, Ji-yoo," she said, a small sigh escaping her lips. "I'll… I'll put her performance last. It will take at least two hours for everyone else to go. If she's not here by then…" She trailed off, the unspoken implication hanging in the air.

A wave of relief washed over me, a small crack in the wall of my anxiety. Two hours. That was enough time. It had to be. "Thank you, Ms. Shin-ah. Thank you so much."

A small, almost imperceptible smile touched her lips. She gave a curt nod. "Just… try not to cause any more 'life and death' situations, Kim Ji-yoo."

I nodded gratefully and hurried back to my seat, the knot in my stomach loosening slightly. Two hours. I just had to hope she was okay. I just had to hope she made

The competition unfolded, a parade of nervous talent taking the stage. A boy with a shaky guitar, a girl with a powerful voice, another girl with a delicate piano melody, then another boy with an energetic dance routine. Each performance was met with polite applause, but my focus remained fixed on the empty space backstage, the growing knot of anxiety in my chest tightening with every passing act.

I could hear So-mi and Hye-jin's hushed whispers behind me, their worry mirroring my own. "She didn't arrive yet, So-mi," Hye-jin said, her voice laced with concern.

"What will happen now? Where is she?" So-mi replied, her usual confident tone tinged with distress.

Dong-hyun and Joon-ho sat beside me, unusually quiet, their gazes fixed on the stage, but I could feel their underlying unease. Joon-ho kept glancing at his watch, while Dong-hyun nervously tapped his fingers on his knee.

I closed my eyes, the sounds of the ongoing performances fading into a muffled background noise. "Gyeong-hu," I whispered under my breath, a silent plea sent out into the unknown. "I believe in you. Just… just don't break your fucking dream." The image of her face, alight with nervous excitement that morning, flashed through my mind, and the thought of her missing this, of that light being extinguished, was unbearable.

The competition was nearing its end. Four names were called, then three. Each step onto the stage, each finished song, chipped away at the remaining sliver of hope. She wasn't here. The weight of her absence pressed down on me, heavy and suffocating. Where in the hell was she?

Just as the final notes of the previous performer faded into the expectant silence, Ms. Shin-ah walked back onto the stage. "And now," she announced, her voice carrying across the hushed hall, "it is time for Lee Gyeong-hu."

My hands clenched into tight fists. Still no sign of her. The grip on the armrest of my chair tightened, my knuckles turning white.

Ms. Shin-ah's voice echoed again, a touch louder this time, tinged with a hint of impatience. "Lee Gyeong-hu?"

"No… what the fuck," I whispered under my breath, a surge of despair washing over me.

Ms. Shin-ah sighed, turning slightly to address the audience. "It seems Miss Lee Gyeong-hu is not present with us this evening. Therefore, I believe it is time to conclude the competition…"

As the word "conclude" left her lips, a sickening twist clenched my stomach. "End?" Joon-ho breathed out, his voice filled with disbelief.

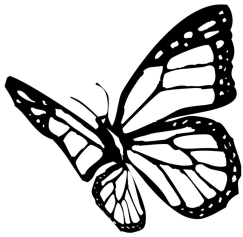
"Where is she?" Dong-hyun murmured, his earlier nervous energy replaced by a palpable worry.

I let out a long, heavy sigh, the weight of disappointment settling over me. Just then, the main doors at the back of the hall creaked open.

A voice, slightly breathless but clear and strong, cut through the silence. "I'm here."

My head snapped towards the entrance. And there she was. Gyeong-hu. Her uniform slightly rumpled, a smudge of dirt on her cheek, but her eyes shining with a fierce determination. A wave of relief, so potent it almost buckled my knees, washed over me. A wide, involuntary smile spread across my face. She made it.

Chapter 32: Lee Gyeong Hu



Ms. Shin-ah, a flicker of surprise crossing her stern features, gave a curt nod. A wave of nervous energy propelled me forward, my legs feeling slightly unsteady as I walked towards the stage. The bright spotlight felt blinding, and the sheer number of eyes fixed on me, the entire school a silent audience, sent a shiver down my spine.

Ms. Shin-ah handed me the microphone, its cool metal a stark contrast to the clammy chill of my hands. My gaze swept across the sea of faces, a blur of expectation and curiosity. Then, my eyes landed on Ji-yoo. He stood slightly apart from our group, his usual casual stance replaced by an intense focus. He caught my eye and gave me a small, almost imperceptible thumbs-up, a silent offering of encouragement. A tiny, reassuring smile touched my lips in response.

I took a deep breath, the microphone feeling heavy in my hand. "I'm not here to win or lose," I said, my voice trembling slightly at first but gaining strength with each word. I paused, my gaze sweeping across the hushed auditorium. "Life gives us a chance to be who we are." My eyes found my friends – So-mi, Hye-jin, Dong-hyun, Joon-ho – their faces a mixture of worry and support. Finally, my gaze settled back on Ji-yoo, his unwavering

attention a silent anchor. "So, here I am. Just being me. Lee Gyeong-hu."

The opening chords of the song began to play, a soft, melancholic melody that resonated with the emotions that had been swirling within me. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, letting the music wash over me, and then I began to sing:

Walking through the crowded halls, I never saw your face,
Lost in hurried footsteps, in this lonely, hurried place.
Then a glance, a sudden spark, a feeling so brand new,
Like a summer rain that washes all the gray away to blue.

'Cause you're the whisper in the quiet, the sunshine in the gray,
You're the reason that I smile at the ending of the day.
And every time you look at me, I feel a gentle breeze,
Like the promise of forever rustling through the autumn trees.

Maybe it was just a touch, a hand that brushed my own,
But suddenly the world felt different, I was never quite alone.
Every word you softly speak, a melody so sweet,
Like the rhythm of my heartbeat when our glances chance to meet.

'Cause you're the whisper in the quiet, the sunshine in the gray,
You're the reason that I smile at the ending of the day.
And every time you look at me, I feel a gentle breeze,
Like the promise of forever rustling through the autumn trees.

I don't need a grand confession, no dramatic, tear-filled scene,
Just the quiet understanding of what lies there in between.
This fragile feeling growing, like a flower in the spring,
The simple, tender knowing of the joy that you can bring.

'Cause you're the whisper in the quiet, the sunshine in the gray,
You're the reason that I smile at the ending of the day.
And every time you look at me, I feel a gentle breeze,
Like the promise of forever rustling through the autumn trees.

My voice, though still carrying a trace of nervousness, filled the auditorium with a raw honesty, each note imbued with the emotions of the past few weeks – the yearning for freedom, the unexpected connection, the fragile hope that had begun to bloom in my heart. As I sang the final notes, a profound silence fell over the room, the weight of my emotions hanging in the air.

A wave of applause washed over me, a warm and validating sound that chased away the last vestiges of my nervousness. A genuine smile bloomed on my face as I stepped down from the stage, my heart swelling with a happiness I had never quite experienced before. The weight of expectation, the fear of judgment, had lifted, replaced by a sense of pure, unadulterated joy.

The judges huddled together, their hushed deliberations creating a palpable sense of suspense that hung in the air. The audience waited with bated breath, their gazes fixed on the stage. My friends gathered around me, their faces beaming with pride.

Finally, Ms. Shin-ah stepped back to the microphone, a dramatic pause before she spoke. "And the winner of this year's Seonghwa Academy Singing Competition is…" She held the envelope aloft, drawing out the anticipation. "…Lee Gyeong-hu!"

Finally, Ms. Shin-ah stepped back to the microphone, a dramatic pause before she spoke. "And the winner of this year's Seonghwa Academy Singing Competition is…" She held the envelope aloft, drawing out the anticipation. "…Lee Gyeong-hu!"

But amidst the joyous chaos, a small, nagging feeling of unease began to creep in. I scanned the crowd, my eyes searching for a familiar face. Ji-yoo. He wasn't there.

"Did you guys see Ji-yoo?" I asked, my voice slightly muffled by So-mi's enthusiastic hug.

Joon-ho and Dong-hyun looked around, their expressions mirroring my own growing concern. "He was here just a minute ago," Joon-ho said, his brow furrowed.

"Yeah, right after you finished singing," Dong-hyun added, his gaze sweeping across the auditorium. "We don't know where he went."

A shadow of disappointment flickered across my elation. He had been there, had witnessed my moment. So why wasn't he here now, sharing in the victory? The unanswered question hung in the air, a small cloud in my otherwise bright and joyful sky.

Chapter 33: Kim Ji Yoo

I sat there, captivated. My… Gyeong-hu. There was no other word for the way her voice filled the auditorium, soft yet powerful, raw with an emotion that tugged at something deep within me. Princess. The ridiculous nickname felt strangely fitting in that moment. As she finished, a wave of applause erupted, and I clapped louder than anyone, a genuine smile plastered across my face. Pride swelled in my chest, an unfamiliar warmth that had nothing to do with winning bets.

Then, a nerdy-looking kid with oversized glasses leaned closer, nudging my arm. "Kim Ji-yoo? Right?"

I turned, my attention momentarily diverted from the radiant figure on stage. "Yeah, that's me."

He peered at me nervously. "Someone arrived from your home. They're calling for you urgently."

A prickle of unease ran down my spine. "Okay, I'm coming." I stood up, my gaze flicking back towards the stage where Gyeong-hu was beaming, oblivious to the sudden urgency that had gripped me. I slipped out of the hall just before the winner announcement, a bad feeling churning in my gut.

Outside the school gates, standing beside a familiar black car, was my grandfather's butler, Mr. Park. His usually composed face was pale and drawn. He saw me and rushed forward, his voice tight with worry. "Master Ji-yoo! It's your grandfather. He's had a heart attack. I'm here to inform you."

The world seemed to tilt on its axis. "What? Where is he?" Panic clawed at my throat, stealing my breath.

Mr. Park's face was grim. "He's at Velmora Medical Center."

Without another word, I spun around, my mind a chaotic mess of fear and disbelief. I scrambled onto my CBR600F4, the familiar weight of the bike usually a source of thrill now feeling heavy and suffocating. The engine roared to life beneath me, a furious sound that mirrored the frantic beating of my own heart. I sped off, the tires screeching against the asphalt, the image of Harabeoji's smiling face flashing before my eyes. The singing competition, Gyeong-hu's victory – everything faded into insignificance. All that mattered was getting to the hospital, getting to him. I pushed the bike to its limit, the wind screaming in my ears, a desperate prayer echoing in my heart.

I reached the hospital in a blur, the screech of my tires echoing in the sterile parking lot. I practically sprinted towards the reception desk, my heart still hammering against my ribs.

"Hello! Is there any patient admitted here with a heart attack? His name is Kim Duck-hwan," I stammered, my voice tight with anxiety.

The receptionist, a woman with tired eyes and a calm demeanor, tapped away at her computer. "Kim Duck-hwan… yes, we have a patient by that name."

"Yes! Yes, that's him! In which room is he?" I pressed, desperate for information.

She looked up at me, her expression professional but firm. "And your relationship to the patient, sir? We have strict rules regarding visitors."

"I'm his grandson," I said quickly.

She studied me for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Room number 108. Second floor."

"Thank you!" I didn't wait for further instructions, turning and practically sprinting towards the elevators. The ride to the second floor felt like an eternity. Finally, I found room 108, the numbers a stark white against the pale door.

I hesitated for a brief second, my hand hovering over the handle, a wave of apprehension washing over me. Then, I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Harabeoji was lying in the hospital bed, surrounded by beeping machines and monitors, but his eyes were open, and he looked… better. A wave of relief washed over me, so potent it almost made my knees buckle. I let out a long, shaky sigh I hadn't even realized I was holding.

His gaze turned towards me, a faint smile touching his lips. "Hey, young man," he said, his voice a little weak but laced with his familiar warmth.

I sank into the chair beside his bed, gently taking his frail hand in mine and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. "Old man, you scared me half to death," I said, my voice thick with emotion.

He smiled weakly, a familiar twinkle returning to his eyes. "You thought this old codger was going to kick the bucket on you?"

I looked at him, my grip tightening on his hand. "Please don't even joke about that. I don't want to lose my coolest grandfather. And then who would I play chess with?"

Just then, a doctor entered the room, her expression professional and kind as she checked Harabeoji's blood pressure. "How are you feeling, Mr. Kim?" she asked gently.

"Much better now, doctor," he replied, his voice gaining a bit more strength.

I stood up, my anxiety still lingering. "Um, Doctor, how is he really? Is there any serious problem?"

She smiled reassuringly. "No, everything seems stable for now. Thank goodness he arrived here in time." She looked at me curiously. "And who are you, by the way?"

"I'm his grandson, Kim Ji-yoo," I replied, my gaze still fixed on Harabeoji.

"Ah, so that was your sister who brought him in?" she asked, making a note on her chart.

I looked at her, a flicker of confusion. "No… who brought him here?"

She looked up, a thoughtful expression on her face. "A girl brought him in. She was wearing a school uniform."

My head snapped up, my gaze meeting Harabeoji's for a brief, questioning moment before returning to the doctor.

"And she said she was his granddaughter," the doctor continued, "that's why we allowed her to stay with him in the initial assessment. She was very worried and took good care of him."

"Okay… thanks, Doctor," I managed, my mind racing.

The doctor was about to leave when she paused and turned back. "And yes, her name was Lee Gyeong-hu."

A wave of shock crashed over me, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place with startling clarity. That's why she was late. That's why her breath had been ragged when she finally appeared at the competition. She hadn't just been delayed; she had been saving someone's life. And that someone… was Harabeoji. The realization hit me with the force of a physical blow. She had risked her dream, the very thing she had been so nervous and excited about, for the sake of the person who meant more to me than anyone else in the world.

My own mother had always been distant, her affection often overshadowed by her rigid expectations. But Harabeoji… he had been my constant. He had been there for the scraped knees and the teenage heartbreaks, the quiet chess games and the booming laughter. He was more than just a grandfather; he was family in its truest sense. And Gyeong-hu, this girl I had teased and observed from a distance, this "princess" with a hidden fire, had put his life before her own aspirations. A profound sense of respect, deeper than anything I had felt before, washed over me. She wasn't just talented; she was selfless. She was something truly extraordinary.

Harabeoji's frail hand tightened on mine, his eyes filled with a gentle warmth as he smiled. "These kinds of kids are too rare

nowadays, Ji-yoo. She was with me the entire time, a beautiful soul inside and out. She took care of me as if I were truly her own grandfather." A wistful look crossed his face. "She reminds me so much of your grandmother, you know. The same kind heart, the same gentle spirit… and even a similar kind of beauty."

A soft smile touched my lips. "Yes, she is," I murmured, the truth of his words resonating deeply within me. "I know."

He looked at me, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. "Do you know her?"

"Yes," I replied, my smile widening slightly. "She's my friend."

Harabeoji's eyebrows arched playfully. "Just a friend?"

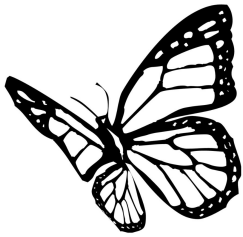
"Yes," I insisted, perhaps a little too quickly. "Just a friend."

He chuckled, a teasing glint in his eyes. "Ahhhh, it hurts right here," he clutched his chest dramatically. "It's my last dream to see my wild grandson finally settle down with a nice girlfriend."

I chuckled softly, shaking my head. It was true; Harabeoji often lamented my lack of a steady girlfriend. He had no idea about the string of fleeting encounters I'd had over the years. They were just games, distractions. None of them had ever held my attention, none had ever made me feel anything beyond a fleeting amusement. That was why I had never bothered introducing them to him. "I think you're going to be around for a long time, Harabeoji. Plenty of time for dreams." A genuine warmth filled me as I said the words. He was going to be okay. And somehow, amidst the worry and the unexpected revelation of Gyeong-hu's selfless act, a new feeling was stirring within me,

something that felt far more significant than any fleeting infatuation.

Chapter 34: Lee Gyeong Hu



The adrenaline of the performance was slowly fading, replaced by a wave of exhaustion and the lingering warmth of the applause. So-mi, her arm around my shoulders, looked at me with concern. "Gyeong-hu, where on earth were you? We were so worried!"

"I… I saw an old man collapse near the convenience store on my way to school," I explained, my voice still a little shaky. "He looked like he was having a heart attack. I waited with him until the ambulance arrived and then went to the hospital for a while."

Joon-ho, who had been scanning the crowd, suddenly frowned. "Hey, where's Ji-yoo? He was practically pacing a hole in the floor with worry before you showed up." He looked at me, a hint of surprise in his voice. "Worried for you like hell, actually."

My heart did a little skip at his words. "Worried… for me?" I asked, a nervous flutter in my stomach.

Dong-hyun nodded. "Yeah, he was the one who went to Ms. Shin-ah and asked her to put your performance last. He was really freaked out when you didn't show up."

Hye-jin, ever the romantic, leaned in close and whispered in my ear, her eyes sparkling. "He totally loves you." I rolled my eyes,

trying to suppress the silly grin that threatened to spread across my face.

"So, how is the old man?" So-mi asked, bringing the conversation back to the morning's unexpected drama.

"He was doing better when I left the hospital," I replied, a small sense of relief washing over me. "The doctors said I got him help just in time."

Joon-ho shook his head, a look of grudging admiration on his face. "You risked your competition… for a complete stranger? No wonder why Ji-yoo calls you 'princess'." A warm feeling bloomed in my chest at his words, a quiet acknowledgment of the unexpected connection I seemed to have forged with the school's notorious bad boy.

As we made our way towards the hospital, a palpable sense of camaraderie filled the air. Joon-ho, ever the thoughtful one in his own boisterous way, stopped at a convenience store near the hospital entrance and emerged with two large boxes of assorted fruit juices.

Hye-jin, with a playful grin, snatched one of the boxes from him. "Consider this my contribution to the 'Get Well Soon' fund," she declared, winking. We all chuckled at her dramatic gesture.

So-mi, her expression earnest, bought a large bag of fresh, colorful fruits, carefully selecting the ripest ones. "Vitamins are key for a speedy recovery," she announced with a decisive nod.

Dong-hyun, after a moment of contemplation, reappeared with a soft, plush blanket, a gentle smile on his face. "He might be cold in the hospital," he explained quietly, holding up the comforting-looking fabric.

I found myself slightly behind the others, a thoughtful frown creasing my brow. What could I possibly offer that would convey the depth of gratitude I felt? My eyes then landed on a small, charming flower shop nestled between the convenience store and the hospital. A sense of clarity washed over me. I stepped inside and carefully chose a bouquet of vibrant, cheerful sunflowers, their bright yellow petals radiating warmth and hope.

We all quietly filed into room 108, a sense of shared purpose uniting us. My gaze immediately went to the figure sitting beside the old man's bed, his back facing us. Then he turned, and my breath hitched in my throat. It was Ji-yoo. His eyes widened, mirroring the shock that must have been plastered on my own face. It looked as if his heart had stopped beating for a moment, just like mine.

Joon-ho and Dong-hyun, however, reacted with a completely different kind of astonishment. They practically sprinted towards the old man's bedside, their voices a confused jumble of disbelief. "Harabeoji? What? How?" Joon-ho stammered, his eyes darting between the old man and Ji-yoo.

Ji-yoo stood up slowly, his gaze never leaving mine. He walked towards me, his expression unreadable. He gently took the sunflowers from my hands and placed them on the bedside table, his fingers brushing mine briefly, sending a strange shiver through me. Our eyes locked, a silent conversation passing between us. Then, suddenly, he pulled me close, his arms wrapping tightly around my waist, his face nuzzling into the crook of my neck. "Thank you," he whispered, the words a low rumble against my skin. I stood there, completely stunned, the warmth of his embrace and the raw emotion in his voice sending a confusing wave of feeling through me.

My hands, still trembling slightly, slowly rose and tentatively wrapped around Ji-yoo's back, returning his tight embrace. I could feel the tension slowly leaving his body as he inhaled deeply, as if drawing comfort from my presence. He pulled back slightly, his gaze intense as he looked down at me. "He was my grandfather," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "My everything."

I realized then that I had been holding my breath, a knot of shock and understanding tightening in my chest. *His* grandfather. The old man I had helped… he was Ji-yoo's family.

Harabeoji chuckled softly from the bed, his eyes twinkling. "And there are my three monkeys," he said, his gaze shifting to Joon-ho and Dong-hyun, who were still looking utterly bewildered.

"But… how did this all happen?" Joon-ho stammered, his eyes darting between me and Harabeoji.

Dong-hyun looked at me, a newfound respect in his gaze. "So… you saved him? And you risked your competition…"

Harabeoji smiled warmly at me. "So, you all know this kind young lady?" He reached out a frail hand towards mine. "Thank you so much, dear. From the bottom of my heart."

I gently squeezed Harabeoji's hand, a genuine warmth spreading through me as I sat on the edge of the hospital bed. "No need to thank me," I said softly, meeting his kind gaze. "You're like my own grandfather." He smiled, a genuine, heartfelt smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

Suddenly, Ji-yoo placed his hand on my shoulder, his touch sending a familiar shiver down my spine. "What about the

competition?" he asked, his voice a low murmur, his eyes searching mine with a mixture of concern and curiosity.

Before I could answer, So-mi burst out, her voice filled with pride, "She…!!!!!.

Hye-jin, never one for subtlety, finished the sentence with an enthusiastic shout, "Won!"

Ji-yoo's head snapped towards me, his grey eyes widening in surprise, then softening into an expression of pure, unadulterated joy. A slow smile spread across his face, chasing away the earlier worry and leaving behind a radiant happiness that reached his eyes. His lips parted slightly, as if he wanted to say something but was momentarily lost for words. He squeezed my shoulder gently, his gaze filled with an emotion I couldn't quite decipher but felt deep within my own heart. It was a look of pride, of relief, and something… more. His eyes sparkled with a genuine delight that mirrored the joy I felt inside, a silent acknowledgment of the unexpected turn of events and the bond that seemed to be forming between us, woven from shared anxieties, selfless acts, and the unexpected connection to the kind old man who lay smiling in the hospital bed.

Ji-yoo’s smile widened, a genuine, unguarded expression that made my heart flutter. "You won?" he breathed out, a hint of disbelief mixed with pure pride. "Princess, you actually won?"

So-mi jumped up and down excitedly. "Yes! She was amazing! Her voice was incredible!"

Hye-jin chimed in, her eyes sparkling. "I told you she was a star! Operation: Decode the Bad Boy clearly unlocked her inner superstar!" She winked at Ji-yoo, who just rolled his eyes, a small smile still playing on his lips.

Joon-ho, ever the pragmatist, looked at me with a newfound respect. "You risked everything for Harabeoji, and you still managed to win? That's… seriously impressive, Gyeong-hu."

Dong-hyun nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you're something else."

Harabeoji chuckled weakly from the bed. "See, Ji-yoo? I told you she was special. A beautiful voice and an even bigger heart." He reached out a hand towards mine, and I took it, his grip surprisingly firm. "Thank you again, my dear."

I smiled at him, a genuine warmth spreading through me. "It was my pleasure, Grandfather."

Ji-yoo's gaze softened as he looked at me, his hand still resting gently on my shoulder. "I… I knew you had it in you," he murmured, his voice low, almost a whisper.

I met his eyes, a silent understanding passing between us. The near-kiss in the storage room, the confusing push and pull of his attention – it all seemed to fade in the face of this shared moment, this unexpected connection forged through worry and a selfless act.

Suddenly, I glanced at my watch, and my eyes widened in surprise. "Oh my goodness! It's so late!.." A wave of belated concern washed over me. My mother would be furious.

I stood up, a flurry of apologies escaping my lips. "I'm so sorry, everyone, but I really need to go. Thank you so much for everything, Sir. I'm so glad you're okay."

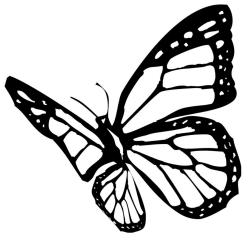
Harabeoji smiled and squeezed my hand. "You go, dear. And thank you again."

Ji-yoo’s hand slipped from my shoulder, a hint of disappointment flickering across his face. "I'll… walk you out," he offered, his gaze still holding mine.

"No, it's okay," I said quickly, a blush rising on my cheeks. “Thank you." I turned to my friends. "I'll see you all tomorrow."

With a final wave, I hurried out of the hospital room, the image of Ji-yoo’s soft gaze and Harabeoji’s grateful smile imprinted in my mind as I rushed to meet my waiting car. The night had taken an unexpected turn, a mix of anxiety, selfless action, and a connection with Ji-yoo that felt deeper and more real than any carefully orchestrated "mission."

Chapter 35: Lee Gyeong Hu



The month that followed was a quiet revolution in my carefully ordered life. My bond with Hye-jin, Dong-hyun, So-mi, and even Joon-ho deepened, forged in the shared anxiety and eventual joy of the competition and the unexpected hospital visit. They became my anchors, my confidantes, the vibrant threads that added unexpected color to my days.

But it was Ji-yoo who became the most significant shift in my orbit. Our interactions at school remained a delicate dance of teasing glances and unspoken understanding, a subtle undercurrent beneath the surface of our usual banter. However, the late hours, when the house fell silent under the watchful eye of my sleeping mother, became our secret sanctuary.

My old landline, a relic from a less complicated time, became the conduit for hushed conversations that stretched into the early hours of the morning. Under the dim glow of my bedside lamp, I would cradle the receiver, Ji-yoo's low voice a comforting presence in the darkness. We talked about everything and nothing – his rebellious escapades, my stifled dreams, the absurdity of school rules, the weight of expectations. He listened with a surprising intensity, his occasional gruff interjections laced with a tenderness that still made my heart flutter. I found myself confiding in him in ways I never had with anyone before,

drawn to the unexpected depth beneath his seemingly careless exterior.

There were moments, stolen whispers across the phone line, that hinted at something more than friendship. A lingering pause after I said goodnight, a slightly deeper tone in his voice when he called me "princess," a shared vulnerability in the quiet confessions of our fears and longings. One night, he confessed his surprise at my selflessness at the hospital, admitting that it had shown him a side of me he hadn't expected. Another night, I found myself telling him about the lingering impact of my father's absence, and his quiet understanding was more comforting than any words my mother had ever offered.

The intimacy of those late-night calls was a world away from the public facade we maintained at school. In the darkness, stripped of the need to project an image, we found a fragile vulnerability with each other. There were no grand pronouncements of love, no dramatic confessions, but the unspoken connection grew stronger with each passing night, a silent understanding blossoming in the quiet hours. The memory of his brief embrace in the hospital lingered, a tangible reminder of the unexpected tenderness he was capable of, a stark contrast to the teasing bad boy the rest of the world saw. Our secret world, woven from hushed words and shared silences, became a precious space, a fragile bridge between friendship and something that felt dangerously close to love.

Chapter 36: Kim Ji Yoo

I sat on the edge of the Y2K Threads building's rooftop, the city lights sprawling beneath us like a fallen constellation. This was Harabeoji's kingdom, the empire he had built with his own two hands. Joon-ho sat beside me, nursing a beer. "Gyeong-hu's getting close to you, isn't she?" he observed, his gaze sharp.

A slow smile spread across my face. "Yeah, she is."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Man, look at her transformation. Used to be all teachers' pet, now she's skipping classes with the best of us." He nudged me with his elbow. "Remember that time she tried your cigarette? Thought she was gonna cough up a lung."

I laughed, the memory vivid. "Yeah, she hated it. Absolutely hated it."

Joon-ho's expression turned serious, his earlier amusement fading. "So, what about the bet? When are you gonna pull the trigger?"

That was the question I had been avoiding, the one that gnawed at the edges of my conscience. I took a long swig of my beer, the

cold liquid doing little to cool the turmoil inside me. "Joon-ho… I can't."

I looked away, the city lights blurring in my vision. "She's done too much." My voice was low, almost a whisper. "She saved Harabeoji. Didn't even think about herself." I paused, the weight of her selfless act pressing down on me. "She… she's something else, Joon-ho. She's a queen, not a princess."

Joon-ho stared at me, disbelief etched on his face. "You're giving up on the bet?"

I finally met his gaze, the decision heavy in my eyes. "I have to. Look, Joon-ho, you know I've never given a damn about anyone. But she… she's like me, in a messed-up way. Her mother only cares about her grades. Her father's always away. She doesn't really have anyone. She only… she only has me. And I just… ah, hell, Joon-ho. I can't break her." The words felt like a confession, a betrayal of the callous persona I had so carefully cultivated. But looking out at the vast, indifferent city, all I felt was a desperate need to protect the fragile light that Gyeong-hu had brought into my dark world.

Joon-ho's gaze was piercing, unwavering. "Do you like her?"

My head snapped towards him, my denial automatic, almost violent. "No! I don't. She's just a friend. A really good friend. But not… not in the way you're implying." My heart hammered against my ribs.

Joon-ho's expression remained skeptical. "Remember the terms of the bet, Ji-yoo. If you lose, you have to bow down to Choi Min-jun's crew. And we both know you'd rather swallow broken glass than do that."

A heavy sigh escaped my lips. That was the brutal, ugly truth I had been trying to ignore. The humiliation, the sheer indignity of bowing to those arrogant thugs… it was unthinkable. Why had I ever been so stupid, so arrogant, to agree to this damn bet in the first place? "Yeah, I don't want that."

Joon-ho's eyes lit up, a spark of his usual cunning returning. "I've got an idea."

I looked at him, a sliver of hope cutting through the knot of dread in my stomach. "What is it?"

"We both know Gyeong-hu likes you now, right?" Joon-ho stated, his tone matter-of-fact.

My head snapped up, a flicker of surprise warring with a sudden unease. "What are you getting at?"

He leaned closer, a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. "Look, the thing is, she likes you. And someday, she's going to tell you she loves you. And at that exact moment, you'll explain to her that you love her as a friend, right?"

I nodded slowly, the scenario playing out in my mind. It was cruel, but it technically fulfilled the terms of the bet without me having to… well, without me having to actively break her heart in a more direct way. "Yes. So?"

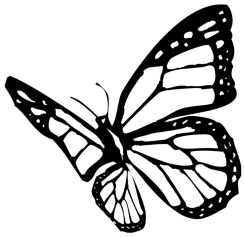
Joon-ho grinned, a touch of his old mischievousness returning. "And at that exact moment, Choi Min-jun's group just *happens* to be there. They hear her confession, they hear your 'friendly' rejection, and boom! They know you won the bet. You uphold your end without, you know… being a complete bastard to her face."

A wave of conflicted emotions washed over me. It was manipulative, a calculated exploitation of Gyeong-hu's feelings. But the alternative – bowing to Choi Min-jun – was a humiliation I couldn't stomach. And… it did technically spare her from a more direct, perhaps harsher, rejection. "Yes," I conceded slowly, the plan feeling both repulsive and… necessary. "You're right. That way… she won't even know about the bet."

Joon-ho clapped me on the shoulder. "Exactly! Clean, efficient, and you get to keep your pride intact."

A grim determination settled over me. "Okay," I said, the words feeling heavy. "I'll… I'll make her say that she loves me when our school takes us on the trip." The upcoming school trip. It would be the stage for this carefully orchestrated, deeply unsettling plan. A plan that felt like a betrayal even as I agreed to it.

Chapter 37 : Lee Gyeong Hu



I glanced at my watch: 11:00 PM. "One, two, and three, there we go," I murmured with a smile, knowing the familiar chime of the landline was imminent. Just as predicted, it rang. I picked up the receiver, a warmth spreading through me. "Hello, how are you?" I asked, my voice light and happy.

"I'm good, princess, as always," Ji-yoo replied, his voice a comforting rumble in my ear. "And yeah, I forgot to ask, how was your English test?"

"It was good," I answered, a touch of pride in my tone. "I got 99 out of 100." Even though I couldn't see him, I could practically feel his smile through the phone line. *Ah, sometimes when I look back to the time of 1999, I really wish we could have had smartphones so that I could see his smile on a video call. Lovers in 2025, I am jealous of you all.* "Oh yeah, thanks for believing in me."

A comfortable silence settled between us before he spoke again, his tone shifting slightly. "So, princess…"

"Yes?" I replied softly, a sense of anticipation building within me.

"Happy 17th birthday," he said, his voice a warm whisper that sent a shiver down my spine.

I laughed softly. "Forty minutes are still left."

"But I can't wait to tell my butterfly that you need to get ready," he continued, a playful excitement in his tone. "Tomorrow, we're going somewhere for your celebration."

My heart skipped a beat. "Somewhere?" I echoed, a mixture of curiosity and excitement bubbling within me. "Where are we going?" My mind raced with possibilities. A quiet dinner? A movie? Knowing Ji-yoo, it could be anything. A mischievous grin spread across my face. "And what should I wear, oh mysterious birthday planner?"

His voice dropped a notch, taking on a low, almost husky quality that sent a familiar thrill through me. "**Where? Whatever you want, princess. Because you're *special*. Whatever you choose to wear… will be perfect.**"

A wide, genuine smile bloomed on my face. That was so undeniably *him*. The casual arrogance, the underlying tenderness, the way he made even the simplest words feel significant. "Special," I echoed softly, the word feeling warm and comforting. My heart fluttered a little faster. Whatever he had planned for tomorrow, I had a feeling it was going to be unforgettable.

The first rays of sunlight filtering through my window stirred me awake. A thrill of anticipation bubbled within me – today was my birthday, and Ji-yoo had a surprise planned. I hopped out of bed and headed straight for my closet, eager to find the perfect outfit for our mysterious outing. However, the array of clothes suddenly seemed overwhelming. Nothing felt quite right.

With a sigh of indecision, I picked up the landline and dialed So-mi's number. After a few sleepy rings, she answered, her voice thick with sleep. "Hmm... hello?"

"Hello, it's me, Gyeong-hu," I said cheerfully.

"Ahhhh... Gyeong-hu? Why are you calling so early?" she mumbled, clearly still half-asleep.

"Because it's only forty minutes left to go to school, and don't you have to go to school?" I replied, a hint of amusement in my voice.

"Yes, I do, but I can get ready in one minute," she mumbled.

I chuckled. "So that's why you're always late for school."

"Okay, okay, what happened? Why did you call me?" she finally asked, her voice a little more awake.

I smiled. "Umm, So-mi, I'm getting ready for the day, and I'm thinking about what to wear."

"Wear your uniform," she suggested groggily.

"Umm, I mean, I'm getting ready to go out, but I'm not going to school," I clarified.

"Oh! So, a bunk day, huh?" she replied, a hint of excitement creeping into her voice.

"Yes, of course! But I don't know where we're going," I confessed.

"I don't know where *you're* going, by the way. With whom?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"With Ji-yoo. Didn't he tell you guys?"

"I don't know about the others, but he didn't tell me. Hmmm, but listen... ummm, wear a mini skirt if you have one."

"Yes, I have one in dark mustard color," I replied.

"Great! Now find a black top to wear with it. Keep your hair open, and go!" And with that, she hung up.

"What? Ahhh, yes, she's trying to sleep," I chuckled, shaking my head at her still-sleepy but surprisingly stylish advice. A dark mustard mini skirt and a black top... interesting. I headed back to my closet, a newfound sense of direction guiding my choices.

I found the perfect black top nestled amongst my other clothes. It was simple yet elegant, with half sleeves and a delicate white butterfly embroidered on the back – a subtle nod to Ji-yoo's nickname for me. It felt serendipitous, like the universe was conspiring to make this day special.

After a quick shower, I slipped on the mustard-colored mini skirt and the black top. I left my hair open, letting it cascade around my shoulders, and chose the comfortable black shoes my father had gifted me last year – they always made me feel a little more confident. A touch of my favorite creamy brown lipstick completed the look.

I looked at my reflection in the mirror, a genuine smile gracing my lips. "Happy 17th birthday, Gyeong-hu," I whispered to myself, a sense of quiet excitement bubbling within me.

Then, my gaze fell upon my neatly folded school uniform. A practical thought struck me. My mother was away in Seoul, but she was due back today. To avoid any awkward questions or

potential lectures about skipping school, I carefully placed my uniform in my bag. That way, I could change before returning home, ensuring my little birthday adventure remained our secret. With my bag slung over my shoulder and a sense of anticipation fluttering in my stomach, I headed out, ready for whatever surprises Ji-yoo had in store.

I hurried downstairs, a delightful aroma filling the air. It was a breakfast spread of all my favorites – kimchi fried rice, seaweed soup, and sweet rolled omelets. I ate quickly, eager to start my special day.

Mr. Choi, my usual driver, was waiting patiently by the car. "Umm, Mr. Choi, could you drop me off in front of the pharmacy store today? I need to buy something before heading to school," I requested, offering him a polite smile.

"Okay, Miss Gyeong-hu," he replied with his usual gentle nod. He drove me to the pharmacy, which was conveniently located across the street from school. As the car pulled away, I stood on the sidewalk, a sense of anticipation bubbling within me.

Just then, a sleek black motorcycle pulled up right in front of me. The rider cut the engine and smoothly removed his helmet. It was Ji-yoo, a wide, charming grin gracing his lips. "Oh my, my birthday princess," he said, his eyes sparkling as they took in my outfit. A blush immediately warmed my cheeks. "Happy birthday! You're looking absolutely amazing, princess." He offered me his spare helmet. "Wear this, and let's go."

I hesitated, a knot of nervousness tightening in my stomach. "Um, Ji-yoo… I've never actually ridden a bike before."

He looked at me, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. "Never? Well, princess, there's a first time for everything. Don't worry, I'm

an excellent driver. Now, here's the secret: just relax and hold on tight. Swing your leg over the back, like you're getting on a horse. That's it. Now, scoot forward a little and hold onto my waist. Not too tight, but enough so you feel secure. See? Easy peasy. Just lean with me when we turn, and try to enjoy the ride. Trust me, princess, this is going to be way more fun than sitting in the back of a stuffy car." He winked, his confidence surprisingly reassuring.

I carefully swung my leg over the back of the motorcycle, feeling a thrill of nervous excitement mixed with a healthy dose of apprehension. As I scooted forward, trying to follow Ji-yoo's instructions, I realized that holding onto the back stand meant an awkward, leaning posture. Maintaining any semblance of distance was proving impossible; my chest, undeniably, was pressed against his back. To avoid falling, I gripped the stand tightly, my knuckles white.

"Hold *me*, princess," Ji-yoo said, his voice a low rumble beneath his helmet.

"Umm, no, I'm fine," I insisted, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

"Okay," he replied, a knowing smirk evident even from the back. He adjusted his helmet and revved the engine. The bike lurched forward suddenly, and my carefully constructed composure vanished. A jolt of pure panic shot through me. Instinct took over, and my hands flew from the cold metal of the stand to the solid warmth of his waist, my grip tightening reflexively. My entire body pressed against his, the leather of his jacket a stark contrast to the soft fabric of my top. I stayed plastered against him, my cheek resting near his shoulder, the scent of his cologne filling my senses, a strange mix of leather and something

uniquely *him*. The initial fear slowly morphed into a different kind of awareness, a warmth spreading through me that had nothing to do with the morning sun. The feel of his body moving beneath mine, the closeness, the shared thrill of the ride… it was undeniably intimate, a dark and unfamiliar romance blooming on the back of a speeding motorcycle.

My legs, despite my attempts to keep them tucked in, brushed against his with every turn, a subtle friction that sent little sparks dancing through me. He didn't comment, didn't shift, just kept his focus on the road ahead, the powerful machine responding to his every move. The wind whipped past us, carrying the sounds of the city, but all I could really feel was the solid presence of him in front of me, the intoxicating nearness.

The speed was exhilarating, a rush of adrenaline that chased away any lingering nervousness about riding. But it wasn't the thrill of the speed that held me captive; it was the feeling of being this close to him, the unexpected intimacy of our shared journey. I didn't want this ride to end. A strange, unfamiliar excitement bloomed within me, a warmth spreading through my core that had nothing to do with the rising temperature of the day. Despite the cool morning air and the refreshing shower I had taken, a different kind of heat was building within me, a secret, undeniable stirring that my own body seemed to recognize even if my conscious mind was still trying to catch up. A flush crept up my neck, a silent acknowledgment of the undeniable pull he had on me.

The motorcycle rumbled to a stop in front of an old, dilapidated theme park nestled near a dense forest. The gates were rusted shut, the paint peeling, and an air of forgotten times hung heavy in the stillness. "Princess," Ji-yoo said, his voice cutting through the quiet.

"Hmm?" I replied, still slightly breathless from the ride.

He swung his leg over the bike and stood, taking off his helmet, his gaze fixed on the deserted park. "This is my kingdom," he declared, a strange mix of pride and melancholy in his tone. "This is where I always come when I'm happy or sad. Because I don't really have anyone with whom I share those things." He paused, his gaze turning to me. "But now… maybe you're the first person to ever enter my kingdom."

A soft smile touched my lips. "I like your kingdom, Ji-yoo," I said, the quiet solitude of the place holding a certain charm.

"Really? You liked it?" he asked, a hint of surprise in his voice.

I smiled wider, taking off my own helmet, the morning air feeling cool against my skin. I followed him as he pushed open a creaking section of the gate and stepped inside.

"You know, Gyeong-hu," he said, turning to look at me, his eyes holding a thoughtful expression.

"Hmm?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"This place is even more beautiful at night. There are so many fireflies here then. Maybe that's why I like the night so much."

"I like the night too," I confessed, a sense of peace washing over me at the thought. "It's like… ahhh, I can't really explain how it feels."

He looked at me, a knowing understanding in his grey eyes. "Like the sky full of stars is listening to you, understanding your pain," he said softly.

"Yes," I whispered, the words resonating deeply within me.

He smiled, a genuine, unguarded smile that reached his eyes and made my heart skip a beat.

The day unfolded like a secret whispered between the rustling leaves and the crumbling remnants of the old theme park. We explored his "kingdom," a place where faded laughter and forgotten dreams still seemed to echo in the wind. We climbed onto the rusted carousel horses, imagining them spinning to a long-lost melody. We walked through the overgrown paths, sharing stories and silences that felt surprisingly comfortable.

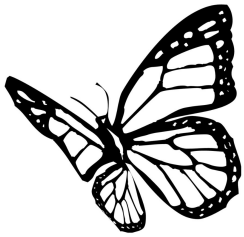
He told me about his childhood, the loneliness that often shadowed his bravado, the quiet solace he found in this forgotten place. I shared my own frustrations with expectations, the yearning for a freedom I had only recently begun to taste. We laughed at silly things – a flock of startled pigeons, a particularly ridiculous piece of graffiti on a decaying wall. He even tried to teach me how to skip stones on a murky pond, his hand briefly touching mine, sending a jolt of unexpected warmth through me.

As the day drew to a close, the setting sun casting long, eerie shadows across the deserted park, we found ourselves sitting on the edge of a broken fountain, the air growing cooler. He turned to me, his usual playful smirk absent, his gaze intense and unwavering. "Happy birthday, Gyeong-hu," he said softly, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through the stillness.

He reached out, his fingers tracing the line of my jaw, his touch sending a shiver down my spine. My breath hitched in my throat. The playful atmosphere of the day seemed to dissipate, replaced by a heavy, almost intimidating tension. His eyes, dark and searching in the fading light, locked onto mine. It felt as if the world around us had ceased to exist, the only reality the intense

connection that held us captive. I could feel the frantic beating of my own heart echoing in my ears, a frantic rhythm that seemed to mirror the pulse throbbing in his neck. His gaze dropped slowly, deliberately, from my eyes to my lips, lingering there for a long, breathless moment. The air crackled with an unspoken desire, a dark and magnetic pull that both terrified and fascinated me.

Chapter 38: Lee Gyeong Hu



He leaned closer, and I didn't pull away. A strange sense of inevitability washed over me, a surrender to the magnetic force that had been drawing us together. His breath, warm and slightly ragged, ghosted over my bottom lip, sending a tremor through me. His hand, calloused yet gentle, reached up to cup my cheek, his thumb stroking the soft skin, igniting a fire within me. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the silence of the deserted park.

He leaned even closer, the distance between us shrinking to mere millimeters. I didn't stop him. Instead, my eyelids fluttered closed, a silent invitation, a yielding to the unspoken desires that had been simmering beneath the surface. He closed the remaining space, his lips finally meeting mine in a soft, tentative touch. My breath hitched, and for a fleeting moment, my heart seemed to stop beating altogether.

Then, his tongue flicked out, a slow, deliberate lick across my bottom lip, and a wave of pure sensation washed over me. A small gasp escaped my lips, and I instinctively parted them, granting him entry. He deepened the kiss instantly, a surge of raw passion igniting between us. His lips moved against mine with a fierce tenderness, and I responded in kind, my own tentative movements growing bolder, mirroring his intensity. His

other hand found the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair, tilting my head to deepen the connection. Our tongues danced together, a silent conversation of longing and unspoken desires, the world around us fading into a blur of sensation and the intoxicating taste of him.

He finally broke the kiss, his lips leaving a trail of soft, lingering kisses along my jawline. A soft moan escaped my lips, a sound I barely recognized as my own. "Ji-yoo… mmm… it's…" I was breathless, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

"It's not right," I managed to whisper, a flicker of doubt warring with the undeniable desire that coursed through me.

He looked into my eyes, his gaze intense and possessive. "Nothing is wrong, princess. We're just enjoying ourselves." His forehead rested against mine, our breaths mingling. "But if you say stop… I will."

I looked up at him, my own desire mirrored in the depths of his grey eyes. "Please… just don't stop," I breathed out, the words a desperate plea.

His hand suddenly moved, his fingers wrapping around my throat, his grip firm but not painful. He pinned me gently against the rough bark of a nearby tree, his kiss deepening with a raw, untamed passion. He pulled back slightly, his eyes burning into mine, a hungry look in their depths. "I'm not gentle, princess. Stop me."

My own desire had eclipsed any lingering doubts. "I won't," I whispered, my voice husky.

A dark smile flickered across his lips before he tilted his head and pressed a searing kiss to the sensitive skin of my neck.

His touch ignited a fire beneath my skin, his hand sliding under the hem of my top, sending shivers racing down my spine. He slowly pulled it upwards, the cool air a stark contrast to the sudden exposure of my skin. The shirt landed softly beside me, discarded without a second thought. He followed suit, his own shirt disappearing just as quickly, revealing a sculpted torso, his six-pack abs flexing with each breath. I reached out, my fingers tracing the hard lines, a sense of awe and a burgeoning desire swirling within me. He smirked, a knowing glint in his eyes, before his lips followed the path of his hands, leaving a trail of heated kisses down my neck, across my collarbone, and lower, to the curve of my belly.

His hand then found the hem of my skirt, pulling it down, the fabric pooling around my ankles. His touch on my bare thigh was electric, sending a jolt of pure sensation through me as his fingers ventured higher, tracing the delicate curve of my inner thigh. He lowered me to the soft earth, his kisses following the exposed skin, leaving a trail of heated marks, little love bites that spoke of a possessive hunger. The red lace of my bra and panties felt suddenly inadequate, a stark contrast to the raw desire that filled the air between us. "You're beautiful," he whispered, his voice husky with longing, his gaze intense as it roamed over my body. "You don't know what you're doing to me, princess."

"Then show me," I breathed out, the words a silent invitation, a yielding to the intoxicating pull he had on me.

My fingers fumbled with the back hooks of my bra, the delicate lace giving way under my eager touch. He watched, his gaze intense, as the fabric fell away, revealing my bare breasts. His breath hitched, his eyes darkening with a possessive hunger as he reached out, his hands cupping their fullness, his thumbs

gently stroking the sensitive tips. A soft moan escaped my lips as he squeezed lightly, a delicious ache blossoming within me. His fingers then trailed lower, a tantalizing journey down my stomach, before dipping beneath the elastic of my panties, finding the already slick heat within.

"So wet," he murmured, his voice thick with desire, his fingers teasing the swollen lips of my vulva. "You know, the sound of your moans… it's like music to my ears, princess. So sing for me. Sing loudly, shamelessly. I want to hear you." His touch became more insistent, circling, pressing, igniting a firestorm of sensation within me.

His finger found my clit, pressing gently, then beginning a slow, deliberate rub. A wave of pure sensation washed over me, making me arch against his touch. Moans, deeper and more unrestrained than before, escaped my lips, my body growing slicker with each stroke. Just as I reached the precipice, he stopped, withdrawing his hand. He looked down at his wet fingers, a predatory gleam in his eyes, and slowly, deliberately, brought them to his lips, sucking them clean. "Yummy," he murmured, his gaze locking with mine, a challenge in his dark depths. "Now, princess… are you going to take these panties off, or shall I?" The unspoken threat, the raw possessiveness in his voice, sent another shiver of anticipation through me. My fingers trembled slightly as I reached down and slowly, deliberately, slid the red lace down my thighs, casting them aside onto the soft earth.

He gently pushed my legs further apart, his gaze never leaving mine as he leaned down. Then, his warm, wet tongue began to explore the most intimate part of me, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. "Mmm… ahhh… Ji-yoo," I moaned, my hips lifting instinctively.

He looked up at me, his eyes blazing with a possessive fire. "Say it louder, princess. Let everyone hear who you belong to." He returned to his sensual assault, his tongue working its magic until I was writhing with need.

He finally stopped, standing up, his gaze still locked on my flushed face. He quickly shed his jeans and then his boxers, and my breath hitched in my throat at the sight of his impressive erection, thick and swollen, undeniably for me. I swallowed hard, a knot of apprehension tightening in my stomach.His almost 14 inches long cock "I… I don't know if I can… it's too big," I whispered, my voice trembling.

He looked down at me, a dark intensity in his eyes. "But you have to, princess. You didn't stop me." He glanced towards the entrance , a predatory glint in his gaze. "Don't worry… I'll try to be gentle." He lowered himself, kneeling between my legs, enjoying my reaction, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. "Maybe."

His thick tip pressed against my entrance, a stark reminder of his size. "Tell me you belong to me," he commanded, his voice a low growl.

Breathless, overwhelmed by a mix of fear and a desperate yearning, I whispered, "Yes… I belong to you."

A dark smile softened his features. "I won't tease you more, princess. Not on your birthday." With a slow, deliberate thrust, he pushed inside. A sharp intake of breath escaped my lips, a searing pain tearing through me as he breached my virginity. My hands clenched in the earth beneath me, my body arching instinctively.

He paused, his eyes locked on mine, a possessive intensity burning within them. "Bleed for me, princess," he whispered, the words both a brutal claim and a strangely intimate demand.

Then, he began to move, slowly at first, each thrust sending waves of unfamiliar sensation through me – a sharp pain mingled with a burgeoning pleasure. Tears welled in my eyes, but I didn't cry out, meeting his gaze with a mixture of fear and a strange, burgeoning desire. He deepened his strokes, his movements becoming more insistent, filling me completely. The initial pain began to dull, replaced by a spreading warmth, a strange, intoxicating ache that resonated deep within my core.

He watched my face intently, his breathing becoming ragged, his muscles flexing with each powerful thrust. I clung to his shoulders, my own breath coming in short, sharp gasps. The world around us faded, the only reality the intense connection between our bodies, the raw, primal rhythm that bound us together in this stolen moment in his forgotten kingdom. The setting sun cast long, dramatic shadows, painting our entwined bodies in hues of fiery orange and deep violet, a silent witness to the shattering of innocence and the raw, untamed claiming that was taking place.

Time ceased to exist in that secluded corner of his kingdom. An hour, perhaps more, maybe less – the relentless rhythm of our bodies became the only measure. Each thrust, each gasp, each shared breath was a moment suspended outside the constraints of time. The initial pain had long since faded, replaced by a swirling vortex of sensation, a raw and primal connection that left me breathless and utterly consumed. I bled, a stark testament to the shattering of my innocence, a mark of his claiming.

Finally, the frantic energy subsided, our ragged breaths echoing in the stillness of the deserted park. He collapsed beside me, his chest heaving, his eyes still locked on mine, a possessive satisfaction in their depths. Slowly, we disentangled ourselves, the cool evening air a stark contrast to the heat that had just enveloped us. I reached for my discarded clothes, the familiar fabric feeling strange against my newly awakened skin. Dressing felt like returning to a different version of myself, one irrevocably changed by the raw and intimate encounter we had just shared.

Chapter 39: Kim Ji Yoo

A cold dread washed over me as I watched Gyeong-hu dress, the remnants of our passion a stark reminder of the line I had just crossed. This was wrong. All of it. A sin, and I was the sinner. This whole thing had started as a stupid bet, a reckless game I was determined to win. But now… now I didn't want to hurt her. Yet the bet loomed, a dark cloud over the fragile connection that had just formed between us.

"Ji-yoo," she said softly, her voice still a little breathless, "I wanted to tell you something."

I knew what was coming. The confession I had been both anticipating and dreading. This wasn't the right time. Not after what had just happened. "Gyeong-hu, umm, I also wanted to say something."

She looked at me, her eyes filled with a hopeful anticipation that twisted my gut. "Okay, you go first." She probably thought I was finally going to say it, the words she longed to hear.

"Gyeong-hu, umm… I know we… we like each other. But maybe not… not like that. Not like… dating. Maybe we should just… stay friends for now? Yeah. Friends. We're definitely friends." I avoided her gaze, focusing on a stray leaf caught in the cracked pavement. I could feel her stare, the warmth in her eyes slowly turning to a cold confusion.

She was silent for a long moment, and the weight of my words hung heavy in the air. Then, she offered a small, hesitant smile. "Okay, Ji-yoo. I… I can understand."

Relief washed over me, tinged with a sharp pang of guilt. "Yeah? Good. Um… it's getting late. You know about your mother. You should probably head home."

She nodded, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. I felt the shift in her, the subtle withdrawal. To try and gauge the damage, I took a risk. "So… give me a kiss goodbye?"

She offered a brighter smile this time, leaning in and kissing me deeply, a lingering tenderness in her touch that made my chest ache. When she pulled back, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small, crystal-like box. "And yes, I have a gift for you. Happy birthday."

I opened the box, revealing a delicate silver locket with a tiny, intricately carved butterfly. "I just… I saw it and thought you'd like it."

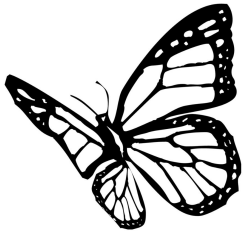
She looked at the locket, her eyes softening. "Thank you, Ji-yoo. It's beautiful."

"Not more beautiful than you," I murmured, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

She chuckled, a light, slightly forced sound. "Hahah, now stop being so romantic. We're just friends, remember?" She stood up. "Okay, shall we go then?"

I nodded, a heavy feeling settling in my stomach. I drove her home, watching as she slipped into her school uniform before disappearing inside. Friends. That's what we were now. But the memory of the raw intimacy we had just shared, the feel of her in my arms, the taste of her lips… it screamed otherwise. The bet was still on, and I had just taken the first, deeply unsettling step towards winning it.

Chapter 40: Lee Gyeong Hu



I slipped into the quiet house, the darkness a stark contrast to the vibrant chaos of the day. I took off my shoes and reached for the light switch, a sense of weariness settling over me. As the lights flickered on, I froze. The living room was filled with people – my usually stern-faced mother, a beaming So-mi, a slightly awkward-looking Dong-hyun, and several of my mother's impeccably dressed office colleagues. And in the center of it all, my mother stood with a beautifully decorated birthday cake, candles flickering merrily.

"Happy birthday!" everyone chorused, their voices a warm wave of unexpected joy.

So-mi rushed forward, engulfing me in a tight hug. "Happy birthday, Gyeong-hu!"

My mother approached, a soft smile gracing her lips, a rare and precious sight. "You thought I forgot your birthday and went to Seoul?" she said gently. "Well, no. I'm not so busy that I wouldn't pay attention to my own daughter's special day." She reached out and cupped my cheek, her touch surprisingly tender.

"Okay, now go to your room. There's something for you there," my mother said, her smile still soft. "And then come back downstairs."

I grinned and nodded. "Yes, Mother." I turned to head upstairs, then paused, a sudden wave of affection washing over me. I ran back to her and hugged her tightly. "Thank you," I whispered.

She hugged me back, a rare display of warmth. "I love you," she said softly.

"I love you more," I replied, my heart feeling full. I turned and headed upstairs, So-mi following close behind.

"Hey, happy birthday again! So, how was the day with Ji-yoo?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"It was good," I replied, a faint blush rising on my cheeks. I opened my bedroom door and gasped. Hanging on a hanger in the middle of the room was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen. It was a royal purple, sleeveless and backless, and just the right length – short but elegant.

"This is the gift from your mom! Now, put it on, and I'll do your makeup," So-mi exclaimed, her excitement contagious.

I smiled, a genuine, heartfelt smile. "This year started so great."

"Great indeed!" she agreed. I went into the bathroom to change, but then I remembered the… souvenirs Ji-yoo had left on my neck. Quickly, I grabbed a scarf and tied it loosely around my neck before coming back out.

"Wow, that dress looks amazing on you!" So-mi exclaimed, her eyes wide with admiration. "But why the fuck are you wearing

that scarf?" she asked, reaching out to touch it. "It's kind of hiding the gorgeous neckline."

"Umm, no reason," I stammered, trying to sound casual. "I just… I wanted to wear it."

So-mi, ever perceptive, gently pulled the scarf away from my neck. Her eyes widened, and a mischievous grin spread across her face as she took in the tell-tale marks. "Oh. My. My. My," she said slowly, her gaze locking with mine, a knowing smirk playing on her lips. My cheeks flushed crimson.

My hands turned icy, a wave of panic washing over me. "Ummm, it's nothing like you think," I stammered, my voice barely a whisper.

So-mi's smirk widened, her eyes dancing with amusement. "Oh, really? Looks pretty… *affectionate* for 'nothing'."

"So-mi, please! No time to explain right now. Can you just… do something?" I pleaded, my cheeks burning.

She leaned in, examining the marks with a professional eye. "Okay, okay," she said, a hint of a giggle escaping her lips. She gently touched one of the darker marks. "Consider this a masterclass in hickey camouflage."

She directed me to sit on my vanity chair and began rummaging through her makeup bag. "Alright, first we neutralize the redness. We'll need a green color corrector. Just a tiny bit, right on the hickeys." She carefully dabbed the green cream onto the love bites, blending it gently with a makeup sponge. "Then, we'll go over it with a concealer that matches your skin tone. Pat it on, don't rub, to avoid irritating the area." She meticulously applied

the concealer, layering it until the redness was completely masked.

Next, she grabbed a setting powder. "A light dusting of translucent powder will help everything stay in place and prevent it from creasing or rubbing off." She gently brushed the powder over the concealed areas. Finally, she stepped back, her head tilted in assessment. "Voilà! Gone. Like they never even happened. Now, no more scandalous neckwear, okay? That gorgeous dress deserves to be seen." She winked, her earlier amusement replaced with a conspiratorial grin. "Your secret's safe with me… for now."

So-mi, with the practiced hand of someone who knew their way around a makeup palette, began to work her magic on my face. It was the late '90s, so the look was all about a fresh, clean canvas. She started with a light foundation, evening out my skin tone without making it look too heavy. Then came a touch of subtle shimmer on my eyelids, a soft, almost pearlescent sheen that caught the light. Eyeliner was a thin, precise line along my upper lash line, just enough to define my eyes. Mascara was applied sparingly, focusing on lengthening rather than adding dramatic volume. For my cheeks, she used a delicate peach blush, just a hint of color to give me a youthful glow. Finally, she carefully applied a vibrant purple lipstick, a bold pop of color that perfectly complemented the royal purple of my dress. "There you go," she announced with a flourish. "All ready!"

I looked at my reflection. It was beautiful – natural yet polished, highlighting my features without being overdone. "It's beautiful, thank you, So-mi," I said, genuinely pleased. My hand instinctively went to my neck, still feeling a little bare despite So-mi's masterful cover-up. "Umm, So-mi, could I wear a locket? Just a small, light one?"

She looked at me, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Okay, but small and light, remember."

"Yes, it is," I assured her, reaching for my bag. I took out the delicate silver locket Ji-yoo had given me. As I did, a small folded piece of paper fluttered out. So-mi, ever quick, picked it up before I could. Her eyes widened as she read the single line written on it: "A butterfly for my butterfly."

A wide smile spread across her face. "Ji-yoo gave you this, right?" she asked, her eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

I smiled, a warm feeling blooming in my chest, and nodded. She carefully helped me fasten the locket around my neck, the cool silver resting against my skin. "Okay," she said, her arm linked through mine. "Come on, let's go downstairs. Your party awaits!"

The rest of the evening was a blur of laughter, warm wishes, and the sweet aroma of birthday cake. I blew out the candles, making a silent wish that felt different this year, tinged with the unexpected complexities and newfound joys of the past few weeks. My mother, for once, seemed genuinely happy, her usual reserve replaced by a softer, more affectionate demeanor. So-mi kept nudging me and winking, her eyes full of knowing amusement. Even Dong-hyun, usually quiet, offered a heartfelt "Happy Birthday" with a shy smile.

As the night wound down and the last of the guests departed, a comfortable silence settled over the house. I was just about to head upstairs, a pleasant weariness washing over me, when the familiar jingle of the landline pierced the quiet. I picked it up, a sense of anticipation mixed with a touch of nervousness.

"Happy birthday, Gyeong-hu-yah," my father's voice, a familiar warmth from across the miles, filled my ear.

"Father!" I exclaimed, a genuine smile spreading across my face. It had been too long since I'd heard his voice.

"Seventeen already," he chuckled softly. "You're growing up so fast. How was your day, my princess?"

"It was… really good, Father," I replied, the memories of the deserted theme park and Ji-yoo's unexpected tenderness flooding my mind. "I was really happy today. Happier than I've been in a long time."

There was a slight pause on the other end. "Happy? That's wonderful to hear, Gyeong-hu-yah. Is there… is there a reason for this newfound happiness? Someone special perhaps?" A hint of teasing entered his voice. "Are you in love?"

My cheeks flushed despite the distance. "No, Father! Nothing like that. Just… things are good. School's going well, my friends are great… everything feels… brighter." I carefully avoided any mention of late-night phone calls or stolen kisses in abandoned amusement parks.

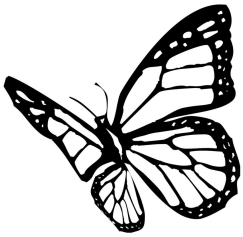
"Hmm, alright, alright," he said, a hint of amusement still lingering in his tone. "Well, I'm glad you had a good day, my dear. Your stepmother wanted to wish you a happy birthday as well."

A slightly less warm voice came on the line. "Happy birthday, Gyeong-hu." It was polite, if a little distant.

"Thank you," I replied, keeping my tone neutral.

After a few more minutes of catching up with my father, the call ended. I hung up the receiver, a mix of emotions swirling within me. My father's call had been a welcome reminder of home, but the undercurrent of his question about love lingered in the air. I wasn't in love… was I? The image of Ji-yoo's intense gaze and the feel of his lips on mine flashed through my mind. I shook my head, trying to clear the confusing thoughts. For now, I was simply happy. And with that thought, I finally headed upstairs to bed, the weight of the eventful day pulling me into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 41: Lee Gyeong Hu



"Hi," I greeted So-mi as she walked into the hall, a bright smile on her face. "How are you?"

"I'm great!" she replied, her usual cheerful self. My mother was engrossed in a phone call on the landline, giving So-mi a quick nod and gesturing for me to take her to my room.

"Come on," I said, leading the way. Once the door was closed behind us, So-mi turned to me, her eyebrows raised expectantly. "So?" she prompted.

"So… nothing, I guess," I mumbled, avoiding her gaze.

"What happened when you went 'bunking' with Ji-yoo?" she asked, her tone laced with curiosity. "Where did you even go? And was it just hickeys, or… something more?" Her directness made my cheeks flush.

I bit my lip, still trying to process everything that had happened. So-mi placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "You can tell me. I won't judge you, you know that."

Taking a deep breath, I finally spilled everything. The deserted theme park, the unexpected intimacy, the raw passion… and then, Ji-yoo's confusing words about just being friends.

So-mi listened intently, her expression shifting from shock to understanding to a fierce protectiveness. When I finished, she shook her head, a look of disbelief on her face. "He's an idiot! He doesn't even know his own feelings. I've known him since we were kids, Gyeong-hu. I'm telling you, I bet he loves you. He's just too stubborn and probably scared to admit it, even to himself." She squeezed my shoulder. "Don't let his mixed signals get you down. We'll figure this out."

"Gyeong-hu, listen to me," So-mi said, her voice firm but gentle. I looked at her, my heart still a tangled mess of confusion and a strange, undeniable yearning. "Don't tell anyone about… all of this," she gestured vaguely, encompassing everything that had transpired with Ji-yoo, "until we're absolutely sure about his feelings for you. Okay?"

"Okay, I won't," I promised, the weight of our secret settling between us.

So-mi's expression softened, a hint of understanding in her eyes. "You know Ji-yoo… he's not the tough guy he tries so hard to be. He's never really known love. His mother left him after his father died, and he's always carried this idea that she hated him." She paused, her gaze thoughtful. "He's built these walls around himself, Gyeong-hu. He's terrified of losing someone he loves again. That kind of fear… it can make people act in crazy ways."

I listened, a new layer of understanding beginning to form beneath the hurt and confusion.

"He needs love, Gyeong-hu. Unconditional love. And I really believe you can give him that," So-mi said, her voice filled with conviction. A small, hopeful smile touched my lips. "And don't

worry," she added, squeezing my hand. "We'll figure out whether he loves you or not. I have a really strong feeling that he does."

The next day at school, my cheeks flushed a deep crimson the moment I saw Ji-yoo leaning against the lockers, a familiar smirk playing on his lips. "Hey, princess," he greeted me casually.

"Hi, idiot," I mumbled, trying to regain some semblance of composure.

"Oh, so you're talking now?" So-mi's voice cut in from behind me, laced with playful sarcasm. I could feel a giggle bubbling up inside me.

Ji-yoo's eyes widened slightly as he turned to face So-mi. "So, you thought you could just kiss her, *fuck* her, and I wouldn't know?" So-mi said, her smirk widening into a full-blown Cheshire cat grin.

He looked at me, a hint of panic in his eyes. "Umm… you told her?"

So-mi crossed her arms, her gaze unwavering. "Say thank you to the makeup gods, you Neanderthal. After she got home, there was a surprise birthday party. Her *hickeys* were practically glowing in the dark. I had to perform a miracle of cosmetic artistry to save your sorry hide. So, yeah, thank me."

Ji-yoo's eyes flicked back to me, a sheepish grin spreading across his face. "Really, princess?"

I nodded, unable to suppress a giggle.

So-mi stepped closer to Ji-yoo, her smile turning positively predatory. "Listen here, Romeo. You lay one more finger on my

best friend without the proper… *commitment*, and you'll be explaining your dental records to the school nurse. Got it, pretty boy?"

Ji-yoo swallowed hard, his usual cocky demeanor momentarily replaced by a look of genuine apprehension. He glanced at me, then back at So-mi, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright! Message received, loud and clear. Consider me… on probation."

So-mi narrowed her eyes, her voice dangerously sweet. "Probation? Honey, you're on thin ice the size of an atom. One wrong move, and you'll be wishing you stuck to just calling her 'princess'." She turned to me, her expression softening instantly. "Come on, Gyeong-hu. Let's leave Romeo here to contemplate his life choices." She looped her arm through mine and steered me away, leaving a slightly bewildered and definitely chastened Ji-yoo in our wake.

Ji-yoo came jogging after us, a determined look on his face. "Umm, So-mi, can you leave us alone for a minute, please?" he asked, his gaze fixed on me.

So-mi looked at him, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Nope. Don't really feel like it." She was clearly enjoying his discomfort. But a part of me, despite the lingering confusion, also wanted a moment alone with him.

"Oh, come on, So-mi," Ji-yoo pleaded, a hint of desperation in his voice. "I'm your childhood friend, remember?"

"So what? Now *she's* my best friend," So-mi retorted, playfully sticking her tongue out at him. "Come on, Gyeong-hu."

Ji-yoo rolled his eyes dramatically. "Stop being her mother," he grumbled.

So-mi chuckled, finally relenting. "Okay, okay, go on, you love-sick couple. But I'm watching you, Romeo!" She gave me a knowing wink and sauntered off, leaving Ji-yoo and me standing awkwardly in the crowded hallway.

He didn't say a word, just took my hand and led me towards a deserted storage room tucked away at the end of the hallway. Once inside, he gently backed me against the wall, his hands reaching up to pin mine above my head, his gaze intense.

"What happened, Ji-yoo?" I asked, trying to sound serious, but a nervous flutter danced in my stomach.

"Nothing," he murmured, his eyes tracing the curve of my lips. "Just this innocent guy wanting a kiss."

I rolled my eyes, a smile betraying my attempt at sternness. "No kiss."

He smirked, leaning closer, his breath warm against my ear. "Why? Afraid it'll put you in the mood for more, princess?" A familiar warmth spread through me, the image of our time in his "kingdom" flashing in my mind. Butterflies definitely took flight.

"Okay," I conceded, my voice barely a whisper. "One kiss."

His smile widened, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "Maybe just one." And then, he closed the distance, his lips crashing against mine in a kiss that was both hungry and passionate, a stark reminder of the raw desire that simmered between us.

He broke the kiss, his eyes dark and possessive as his hand slid beneath the hem of my school skirt. "Ji-yoo," I gasped, a thrill of forbidden excitement mixed with a jolt of fear. "We're in school. Someone will find us."

He leaned closer, his lips brushing against my ear, his breath warm and intoxicating. "Shhh, princess. No one will find us out." His hand continued its forbidden journey, slipping beneath the elastic of my panties. I bit my lip, fighting back the moan that threatened to escape. He saw my struggle, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. He released my hands, one moving to cover my mouth, silencing my protests, while the other hand delved further under my skirt, pushing my panties aside. His fingers found their mark, and a familiar heat bloomed between my legs as he began to rub my clit. Just like that day in his "kingdom," a wildness took over, my body responding instinctively to his touch. His breath grew heavy against my ear as he whispered, his voice thick with possessive desire, "That pussy of yours is owned by me, princess. Don't you ever forget that." A wave of heat washed over me, and despite my efforts to remain silent, a soft whimper escaped past his hand. The tension built rapidly, and before I knew it, I was shuddering, a release washing over me, my orgasm staining his hand. He stopped, his eyes never leaving mine. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, he unbuckled his uniform pants, revealing his engorged member. He lowered my damp panties further, his gaze burning as he rubbed his thick length against my swollen, sensitive lips.

"Yes," he breathed against my lips, his hips beginning to move in a slow, deliberate rhythm, the hard length of his erection rubbing against my swollen clit and the sensitive folds of my labia. His free hand left my mouth, tracing a path up my throat, his fingers gently gripping my neck, a possessive touch that wasn't painful but sent a shiver of both fear and excitement

through me. He pulled my head closer, his kiss deepening, a primal claiming in the confined space of the storage room. The friction intensified, the pressure building, and with a guttural groan, he shuddered, his body going rigid for a moment. I felt the warm pulse of his release, not directly on me, but close, a stark reminder of the raw power he held over my senses.

He looked at me, his eyes still dark with lingering desire. "Wear your panties and go back to class, princess. And think about me." He adjusted his uniform pants, his gaze holding mine for a long, intense moment before he leaned in for one last, deep kiss. Then, he turned and left the storage room, disappearing back into the bustling hallway. I licked my swollen lips, the taste of him still lingering, and stood there for a moment, my body still humming with the aftershocks of our encounter. Finally, I straightened my skirt and headed towards class.

Later, during lunch, So-mi eyed me with a knowing smirk. "So? What happened in the forbidden storage closet?"

"Nothing," I replied, the lie sliding off my tongue with surprising ease. "We just kissed."

"Okay…" she said, her tone skeptical.

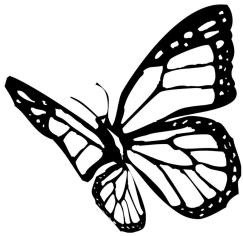
Hye-jin, ever observant, looked from So-mi to me, her brow furrowed. "What are you two whispering about?"

A flicker of panic shot through me. "Oh! We were just talking about… ah… So-mi's new idea about makeup, right, So-mi?" I gave her a pointed look.

So-mi, quick on the uptake, chimed in, "Oh! Ah, yeah, yeah! That's right. A really… innovative new technique." We

exchanged a nervous glance, our carefully constructed lie hanging precariously in the air.

Chapter 42: Lee Gyeong Hu



Days bled into weeks, a clandestine dance of stolen moments and whispered secrets. The storage room became our forbidden sanctuary, the thrill of near discovery adding an edge to our passionate encounters. Corners of the school, empty classrooms after hours, even the relative privacy of our "bunking" escapades became stages for our unspoken desires.

My academic focus, once laser-sharp, began to blur. The top position I had always held slipped through my fingers, replaced by a respectable but nonetheless disappointing second place. Hiding the marked tests from my ever-vigilant mother became another layer to the carefully constructed facade I was now living.

Ji-yoo still didn't utter the words I longed to hear. He remained a tangled mix of possessiveness and a guarded tenderness. He would hold me captive with his intense gaze one moment, his touch branding me as his own, and then retreat into a casual indifference the next. Yet, beneath the surface bravado, I could feel it – a shift in his demeanor, a vulnerability that occasionally flickered in his eyes, a protectiveness that went beyond mere possessiveness. He was still building walls, brick by cautious brick, but I could sense them trembling, the foundations perhaps beginning to crack. His actions spoke louder than his carefully chosen words, and in the stolen kisses and lingering touches, I held onto the fragile hope that the walls around his heart were slowly starting to crumble.

One day. As the last bell echoed through the empty hallways, I was the only one left in the classroom, slowly packing my bag. A shiver of unease ran down my spine as Choi Min-jun, a boy whose presence always felt like a dark cloud, sauntered in. "Hey, Lee Gyeong-hu," he said, a smirk playing on his lips.

I forced a polite smile. "Yes?"

He leaned against a desk, his eyes narrowed. "You've been spending a lot of time with Kim Ji-yoo lately."

I blinked, a defensive instinct kicking in. "So what?"

"So," he continued, his voice laced with a malicious undertone, "does your precious mother know you have a… guy friend? Or should I say, *boyfriend*?"

Just then, as if summoned by my rising anxiety, Ji-yoo appeared in the doorway. He must have overheard Choi Min-jun's last words. Without a word, he strode towards him and landed a sharp punch to his jaw. "Stay away from her," Ji-yoo growled, rubbing his own knuckles, his face contorted with anger. He grabbed my hand, his grip tight, and practically dragged me out of the classroom.

"Ji-yoo, leave me! You're hurting me," I protested, trying to pull my hand away. He released me abruptly. "What was that?" I demanded, my own anger rising to meet his.

"That motherfucker was trying to say something about what's mine, and you're asking what happened?" he retorted, his jaw clenched.

"Ji-yoo, nothing happened, okay? So stop reacting like a nine-year-old throwing a tantrum before even knowing what's going on!"

His jaw tightened further, his eyes blazing. "Okay, then. What do *you* want?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and stalked away, leaving me standing alone in the deserted hallway, a whirlwind of confusion and frustration swirling within me.

I lay on my bed, the anger still simmering within me. "Monkey," I muttered, the nickname usually carrying a hint of affection now laced with irritation. "Idiot." A wave of dizziness washed over me. I reached for the thermometer on my bedside table and checked my temperature. 100 degrees. And he still hadn't called. The anger intensified, a hot, uncomfortable feeling mirroring the rising fever.

Suddenly, the landline beside my bed rang. My heart leaped with a foolish hope. "Hello, Ji-yoo?" I asked, my voice betraying a vulnerability I didn't want to show. But the voice on the other end was unfamiliar. "Ma'am, I am Josh, working in a bank as a salesman, so I have a card helpful—" Before he could finish his spiel, I slammed the receiver down in frustration.

The phone rang again almost immediately. I snatched it up, my voice sharp with irritation. "I don't want to buy any card!"

There was a moment of silence, and then a familiar voice, low and hesitant, said, "Princess… it's me."

I let out a shaky sigh. "Oh, so you're finally free to call me after all that reckless fighting?" I asked, my anger still simmering beneath a layer of exhaustion.

"Look, princess," he said, his voice tight, "I got angry because I care about you."

"Care about what?" I retorted, my voice rising with each word. "Because you 'love' me as a friend but fuck me like your wife?"

I heard his sharp intake of breath, a sigh that spoke volumes. "Princess, look—"

"No, I won't," I interrupted, my voice trembling. "Why are you being so possessive?" A sudden cough wracked my body. "What happened? Are you okay?" he asked, a flicker of concern in his tone.

"Yes," I snapped, my anger flaring anew. "Only a 100-degree fever. Not dead yet."

"You idiot," he muttered, and then the line went dead. My face flushed even hotter, the anger now mixed with a confusing cocktail of hurt and a strange, unwanted concern.

I stared at the clock on my wall, the numbers mocking me. "He doesn't fucking care," I whispered, a bitter taste in my mouth. "I hate you," I murmured, turning away, tears pricking at my eyes. "Idiot. Thinking he loved me."

The landline rang again, the shrill sound cutting through my self-pity. I glanced at the caller ID – unknown. "Hello?" I answered, my voice flat.

"Idiot, come down." The gruff, familiar voice sent a jolt through me.

"Ji-yoo?"

"No, his ghost. Now get your lazy butt out of your house, or I'm coming inside." I rolled my eyes, a small smile tugging at the corner of my lips despite myself.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." I slipped on my shoes, not bothering to change out of my nightgown, and crept downstairs. The guard by the main door was surprisingly asleep, giving me the perfect opportunity to slip outside. Ji-yoo was standing by his bike, his silhouette outlined by the dim streetlights.

"What are you doing here in the middle of the night?" I asked, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably.

He reached out, the back of his hand cool against my forehead. "Your temperature is up. I don't think it's just 100 degrees." I looked away, a warmth spreading through me despite the fever. "So, you care, huh?"

He gently cupped my chin, tilting my head up, forcing me to meet his gaze. He leaned close, his eyes searching mine. "Princess, I care more than you think. And about you saying I love you as a friend but… well." His thumb traced my bottom lip, a familiar shiver running through me. He looked deep into my eyes. "Sometimes, some things take time. That's just how things work."

"Understand?" he asked softly.

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat. "Hmm."

"Taken any medicine?"

"No."

He pulled a small packet of pills from his pocket. "Take these. It's for the fever. It'll help." I nodded and swallowed them dry. He then pulled me into a tight hug, his arms wrapping around me securely. "Now go and rest."

"Ji-yoo," I mumbled into his chest, "how am I supposed to go if you're holding me this tight?" A small smile finally broke through my earlier anger.

He chuckled softly, pulling away just enough to press a tender kiss to my forehead. "Bye," he whispered.

I didn't want to leave his warmth, but my body ached with exhaustion. "Bye, Ji-yoo."

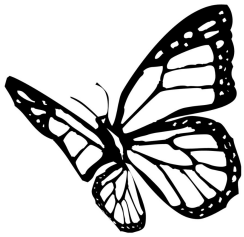
He gave me one last, lingering smile before turning and walking back to his bike. As I slipped back inside, took a glass of water, and finally lay down in bed, a certainty settled within me. He loved me. And despite all the confusion and the hurt, I loved him so much too.

The fever clung to me for two long days, keeping me confined within the four walls of my room. But even in my weakened state, a secret warmth bloomed within me. Every night, like clockwork, the familiar rumble of his motorcycle would break the silence of the street below. Two short, distinct honks – our clandestine signal.

From my window, I would watch him arrive, his silhouette a comforting presence in the dim streetlight. We would simply stare at each other, across the distance, a silent conversation passing between us. A look of concern etched on his face, a small, reassuring smile on mine. It was a love born in the quiet corners of the late 90s, a language of unspoken glances and shared silences, a depth of connection that the instant

gratification of the Gen-Z world could never truly grasp. There was a profound intimacy in those nightly vigils, a testament to a patience and a yearning that transcended words and screens. Just knowing he was there, under the cloak of night, was enough to soothe my restless spirit and chase away the lingering remnants of my fevered dreams.

Chapter 43: Lee Gyeong Hu



Finally back at school after the fever, I was swamped with catching up on missed assignments, leaving little time to even glance in Ji-yoo's direction all morning. The lunch break was just minutes away when Mr. Kang's voice boomed through the classroom. "Alright, students, as the school year nears its end, I have an exciting announcement. Classes 11 and 12 will be going on a three-day trip to the Western Velmora Mountains! We've arranged accommodation at a safe and comfortable hotel, and I hope you all will join us."

My heart did a little leap. Class 12 meant Ji-yoo would be going too. Three whole days… all day… together. Without hesitation, I added my name to the sign-up sheet.

Hye-jin bounced over to me as the lunch bell rang. "Hey! Are you going on the trip?"

So-mi joined her, her arm around Hye-jin's shoulders. "I'm definitely going!"

"Oh, great! That'll be so much fun," I agreed, a smile spreading across my face.

"Yeah! What about you, Dong-hyun?" So-mi asked, turning to him.

Dong-hyun, his gaze flicking towards So-mi, nodded. "Yeah, I'm coming."

Joon-ho looked at So-mi, a teasing glint in his eyes. "Someone forgot to ask me."

So-mi clutched her chest dramatically. "Oh, forgive me, your Majesty! My royal Joon-ho, are *you* gracing us with your presence on this momentous journey?"

Joon-ho responded with equal theatrics. "Oh yes, my fair goddess! I could never disappoint such a radiant being. Thus, I shall endure the arduous mountain trek."

So-mi rolled her eyes, a smile playing on her lips. Hye-jin, meanwhile, was scanning the bustling cafeteria. "Where's Ji-yoo?"

Joon-ho's gaze drifted away, a shadow crossing his face. I looked at him, a knot of unease tightening in my stomach. "Joon-ho? What happened?"

He sighed. "Nothing much. I just… I didn't realize and said something that probably hurt Ji-yoo."

"What do you mean?" I pressed.

"My mom knitted me this really warm sweater, you know, since winter's coming. I was happy and mentioned it in front of him… and, well, his mother hasn't even called him in years."

A wave of sympathy washed over me. "So, where is he now?"

Joon-ho looked towards the windows, a knowing sadness in his eyes. "Hundred percent chance he's in his usual spot – that empty music room, playing his guitar like always when he's feeling down." I looked away, a heavy sigh escaping my lips. The thought of him alone and hurting tugged at my heart.

I made my way towards the music room, the faint strains of electric guitar growing louder with each step. It was a raw, angry melody, each chord vibrating with an intensity that mirrored the turmoil Joon-ho had described. I pushed the door open to find Ji-yoo sitting on a stool, his guitar slung low, his fingers flying across the fretboard with a furious energy. He stopped abruptly as I entered, the last chord hanging in the air before fading into silence. He rested the guitar against the wall and looked up at me, his expression guarded.

"Wow," I said softly, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere, "someone's even better at guitar than my singing."

A small, forced smile touched his lips. "Oh my god," I continued, stepping closer, "someone's looking angry and didn't even give me a proper kiss or hug."

He finally let a genuine smile break through his frustration, reaching out and pulling me into a quick, tight kiss before releasing me. "How are you feeling, princess?" he asked, his eyes searching mine with concern.

"Better," I replied, my own smile widening. "Definitely better after seeing you." I looked up at him, deciding this was as good a time as any. "You know, Ji-yoo, next month our school is taking us on a trip to the Western Velmora Mountains for three days. Both 11th and 12th grade are going, so that means… we'll be together for three whole days."

A genuine, unguarded smile spread across his face, chasing away the lingering shadows of his earlier mood. "That's great," he said, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. "So, will you go?"

"Yes, of course I'll go," I replied, my gaze locking with his. "Because you'll be there."

He pulled me into a tight hug, his arms wrapping around me securely. "We'll have fun," he murmured into my hair.

I hugged him back, a sense of excitement bubbling within me. "Yes, we will. Okay, by the way, everyone's a little worried. Come on, let's join the group outside."

I hugged him back, a sense of excitement bubbling within me. "Yes, we will. Okay, by the way, everyone's a little worried. Come on, let's join the group outside."

He smiled, a hint of his usual playful charm returning. "As you wish, my princess."

I grinned, taking his hand, and together we walked out of the quiet solitude of the music room and back into the noisy bustle of the lunch break.

As the school day ended, Mr. Choi was waiting patiently by the car. I settled into the back seat, my thoughts still lingering on Ji-yoo's earlier sadness. The image of him appearing at my house that night, his concern evident even in his gruff demeanor, softened the lingering frustration I sometimes felt towards him. I should do something, a small gesture to show I cared.

"Um, Mr. Choi," I said, breaking the comfortable silence, "could you take me to the market? I need to buy something."

He nodded politely. "Of course, Miss Gyeong-hu."

At the bustling market, amidst the vibrant colors and lively chatter, I found a magazine with detailed instructions on how to knit a sweater. Then, carefully choosing soft, high-quality yarn, I selected skeins of deep, comforting dark blue and a lighter, hopeful blue. An idea was forming, a quiet way to reach out to the boy who hid his vulnerabilities beneath a tough exterior.

The magazine became my teacher, its glossy pages filled with diagrams and step-by-step instructions that were my only guide in this unfamiliar territory. In the late 90s, there was no quick YouTube tutorial to demonstrate the intricacies of knitting. Each stitch, each turn, had to be deciphered from static images and carefully worded explanations. I pored over every page, studying the different patterns and techniques, my brow furrowed in concentration. Being a complete beginner, I wisely opted for a simple yet stylish design, something I could hopefully master without too many frustrating setbacks.

The first attempts were… disastrous. Tangled yarn, uneven stitches, and shapeless lumps were the initial results of my earnest efforts. I unravelled more rows than I successfully knitted, my initial enthusiasm threatening to wane. But the thought of Ji-yoo, the image of his fleeting sadness, spurred me on. With stubborn determination, I kept trying, the rhythmic click of the knitting needles slowly becoming less clumsy, my stitches gradually evening out. Each successful row felt like a small victory, a tangible expression of the care I wanted to convey.

Balancing my mother's relentless academic expectations, Ji-yoo's tempting requests for stolen moments, and the ever-present pressure of upcoming tests was a delicate juggling act. The knitting needles became my secret companions,

clicking softly in the quiet corners of my room, or even tucked away in the privacy of the bathroom, whenever I could steal a few precious moments. "Ouch!" I winced as the sharp point pricked my right hand's third finger yet again. Great. Another tiny wound to add to the growing collection. But I persevered, tucking stray strands of hair behind my ear with my less-injured hand, my focus solely on the intricate loops and knots.

Getting Ji-yoo's measurements without arousing suspicion was a covert operation worthy of a spy novel. During one of our stolen moments in the deserted storage room, while he was distracted by a particularly heated kiss, I subtly ran my fingers along his back and shoulders, trying to gauge his width. Another time, while we were huddled together during a movie at Hye-jin's house (a rare "group" outing), I casually draped my arm across his chest, trying to estimate his torso length. It was a risky game, a series of fleeting touches and mental calculations that somehow, miraculously, yielded a rough approximation of his size.

For a whole month, sleep became a luxury I could barely afford. Late nights were spent under the soft glow of my bedside lamp, the rhythmic clicking of the needles a constant soundtrack to my secret endeavor. I still talked to Ji-yoo every night, our hushed conversations a familiar comfort, but I kept my knitting project a closely guarded secret, not even confiding in So-mi. It was a surprise I desperately wanted to see through, a tangible expression of the feelings I couldn't always articulate. The thought of his reaction, the hope of seeing a genuine smile on his face, fueled my tired fingers and kept me going through the long, silent nights.

Finally, after countless hours of painstaking work, the sweater was complete. The dark blue and lighter blue yarns had

intertwined to create a simple yet stylish design, the stitches a testament to my perseverance. Holding the finished garment in my hands, soft and slightly uneven in places but undeniably made with love, a wave of satisfaction washed over me. It wasn't perfect, but it was mine.

The upcoming school trip to the Western Velmora Mountains felt like the perfect opportunity. A secluded, perhaps even slightly romantic backdrop for my surprise. I carefully folded the sweater and tucked it away in my bag, a secret treasure waiting for the right moment to be revealed. The thought of Ji-yoo's reaction, the image of him wearing something I had made just for him, filled me with a quiet anticipation. The mountains, with their majestic peaks and whispering winds, would bear witness to a gesture that spoke volumes of the feelings I held in my heart.

Chapter 44: Kim Ji Yoo

The flashing lights and booming sounds of the game store were a familiar escape. I gripped the controller, adrenaline pumping as I navigated the virtual battlefield. Beside me, Joon-ho slammed his keyboard in frustration. "Ugh, dude, I hate you!"

I chuckled, a smug grin spreading across my face. "I know."

He swiveled in his chair, his expression serious. "Look, Ji-yoo, I know you're probably still worried about this whole bet thing."

My amusement faded slightly. The weight of the stupid agreement still lingered, a knot of guilt tightening in my stomach whenever I thought about Gyeong-hu. "Yeah," I admitted, my gaze drifting back to the game screen.

"The trip," Joon-ho continued, his voice insistent. "The mountain trip is the perfect opportunity to just… finish it. It's the kind of setting where she's likely to say it. Just… get it over with." He had no idea the lines we had already blurred, the boundaries we had already crossed. That was a secret I kept locked away.

"Hmm," I mumbled, noncommittally, my focus wavering between the game and the unsettling thought of manipulating Gyeong-hu's feelings. "I'll… try." The words felt hollow, even to my own ears. The thought of orchestrating that moment, of

hearing those words knowing they were part of a twisted game, left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Chapter 45: Lee Gyeong Hu

"Three days," I murmured to myself, surveying the clothes laid out on my bed. "Okay, so three dresses and one pair of night pajamas should be enough." I carefully folded them into my suitcase. "Oh yeah, and a toothbrush and toothpaste." I added those to my bag, then rummaged through my drawer, a thoughtful expression on my face.

"Finding soap?" My mother's voice came from the doorway. I turned to face her, and indeed, a bar of my favorite lavender soap was in her outstretched hand. "Thank you, Mother," I said, a small smile touching my lips as she handed it to me.

"Gyeong-hu," she said, her tone softer than usual. I looked at her, surprised. "I'll miss you, even if it's just for three days." It was the first time I could remember her saying something like that.

"I'll miss you too," I replied, my heart feeling a little lighter.

"Just remember not to forget about your studies, okay? And always be my best daughter." I smiled and nodded, a warmth spreading through me at her uncharacteristic tenderness. She then handed me a bulky, reel camera. "Take this and make your pictures." She also pressed a few extra rolls of film into my hand. In the late 90s, capturing memories wasn't as simple as tapping

a screen. Each click was precious, each reel a finite resource. Extra reels felt like an extravagant gift, a promise of being able to hold onto more of those fleeting moments. "Thanks, Mother," I said, my smile widening.

She hugged me, a brief but meaningful embrace. "Okay, so I'm in the car. Come soon. I'll drop you off at school today."

"Okay," I nodded, my suitcase in hand, a sense of anticipation and a newfound warmth towards my mother filling me as I followed her downstairs.

I spotted my hairbrush lying on the dresser. "Ah, almost forgot you," I chuckled, picking it up and tucking it into my bag. Then, remembering So-mi's expert makeup advice, I grabbed a few of my favorite lipsticks and added them to my essentials. With my suitcase in hand, a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation swirling within me, I headed downstairs to meet my mother. The mountain trip was finally about to begin.

I hurried downstairs, my backpack slung over my shoulder. Breakfast was already a distant memory. I was wearing my favorite dark blue jeans and a simple white shirt. My mother was waiting in the car. As we reach "Bye, Mother," I said, leaning in for a quick hug. She smiled and kissed my cheek. I nodded, gave a small bow, and headed into the bustling school grounds.

So-mi was waiting just inside the gate, her usual energetic self. "I was waiting for you! You're late! Come on!"

"Umm, I think I'm on time," I said, glancing at the school clock.

She rolled her eyes playfully. "But *I* came earlier!" I chuckled. "Wow, Miss Always-Late arrived early for once."

She grinned. "Yeah, maybe the excitement got to me. Now come on!" She grabbed my hand and started pulling me towards the waiting buses.

"Wait! I can't go in that one," I said, stopping abruptly.

She turned, a puzzled look on her face. "Why not?"

I gestured towards the bus. "Because that's the 12th-grade bus. You know… yours, Hye-jin's, Joon-ho's… Ji-yoo's." A knowing look flickered in her eyes. "Me and Dong-hyun will be in the 11th-grade bus."

"Fuck, girl! You won't be with us on the bus? Ahhhh!" she groaned dramatically.

"Don't worry," I reassured her, squeezing her hand. "At least I'll be with you on the mountain."

She nodded, her enthusiasm returning. "Yeah, you will!"

Suddenly, a pair of hands covered my eyes from behind. "Guess who?" a familiar voice chuckled.

"Umm… Ji-yoo?" I said, a smile spreading across my face.

He removed his hands, stepping around to face me. "Yes, princess, it's me."

"Okay, so Ji-yoo," I said, my gaze lingering on him, "we're in different buses."

He smirked, that familiar spark in his eyes. "But we'll be together there for three whole days."

"Yes, we will," I echoed, my heart doing a little flutter.

Mr. Park's voice boomed, "Alright everyone, let's get on your respective buses!"

I headed towards the 11th-grade bus and found a window seat. A girl from my class, Yun Sa-ri, sat down beside me. As the bus started to fill, I glanced out the window and spotted Ji-yoo's bus. Joon-ho was sitting by a window, and I had a feeling Ji-yoo was on that side with him. Just then, Joon-ho's eyes landed on mine. I waved, and he waved back, saying something to Ji-yoo. Ji-yoo stood up and let Joon-ho slide over, taking the window seat for himself. He caught my eye, a small, knowing smile playing on his lips. A wave of anticipation washed over me. The trip had officially begun.

The bus lurched forward, the journey to the Western Velmora Mountains underway. I gazed out the window, the scenery blurring into a monotonous green and brown. A wave of boredom washed over me. While everyone around me in the 11th-grade bus chattered excitedly, I didn't really have any close friends in my class besides Dong-hyun. I glanced back to see him already slumped against the window, fast asleep. With a sigh, I leaned back in my seat and pulled out a novel from my bag, hoping to lose myself in its pages. After a while, a queasy feeling stirred in my stomach. I closed the book, my gaze fixed on the winding road outside, willing the nausea to subside. The drive was a long one, three hours, and eventually, the gentle rocking of the bus lulled me into a fitful sleep.

I woke to a gentle nudge and a soft voice. "Hey, Kim Gyeong Hu, wake up." I blinked open my eyes to see the girl who had been sitting beside me in the bus. "The bus has stopped to eat something, so I thought I should wake you."

I sat up, groggily. "Thank you," I mumbled, stretching my stiff limbs. Everyone was disembarking from our bus, and I noticed Ji-yoo's bus had also just pulled up beside ours. Hye-jin was coming down the steps. "Hello," I greeted her.

"Hi! I think you slept the whole ride," she said, a small smile on her face.

I chuckled. "Oh yes, I did. You all weren't there; maybe that's why I fell asleep. I was really bored."

"Oh, don't worry," she reassured me. "We'll have tons of fun over there."

"Oh yeah, we will," I agreed enthusiastically. Just then, Joon-ho sauntered over, Ji-yoo trailing behind him. "So, what are you ladies up to? And where's the goddess?" Joon-ho called out.

"I am here, mister drama king," So-mi declared, appearing from behind Hye-jin. Joon-ho rolled his eyes mockingly. "Oh, come on!" So-mi retorted, making a series of ridiculous faces at him.

Ji-yoo's gaze found mine. He gently tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Looking sleepy, huh?" he murmured, a soft smile playing on his lips. He leaned in close, his breath warm against my ear. "Sleep now," he whispered, his voice low and suggestive. "Because tonight, I won't let you sleep, princess." He straightened up, a playful glint in his eyes.

We all grabbed some light snacks – bags of chips and the ever-popular banana milk – our laughter and chatter filling the brief rest stop. The mountain air felt crisp and clean, a refreshing change from the stuffy bus. The anticipation for the days ahead hung in the air, a tangible excitement that even my lingering sleepiness couldn't fully dampen.

So-mi leaned closer as I sipped my banana milk, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I have an idea," she announced.

"About what?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"About figuring out if Ji-yoo really loves you or not."

"And what's the brilliant plan this time?" I asked, a hint of skepticism in my voice.

"Okay, so near the hotel, I heard there's a pretty big forest. You go in there, just for a little while, and I'll tell Ji-yoo that you went in and haven't come back. If he really cares about you, he'll be worried sick and come looking for you."

I chewed on my lip, considering the idea. "So-mi? I don't know if that's such a good plan. It feels a little… mean."

"We can try, at least!" she insisted, her eyes pleading. "Just for a little while. What's the harm?"

I sighed, a part of me wanting to know the truth, however it might be revealed. "Okay," I agreed reluctantly.

Later, after we arrived at the hotel and everyone was milling about, I slipped away unnoticed and ventured towards the edge of the nearby forest. The trees were tall and dense, casting long, eerie shadows even in the late afternoon light. I walked a little ways in, the sounds of the hotel fading behind me, and then I stopped, a nervous flutter in my stomach. Now all I could do was wait.

Meanwhile, back at the hotel, So-mi approached Ji-yoo, her expression a mask of concern. "Ji-yoo," she said, her voice

slightly trembling, "Gyeong-hu… she went into the forest a while ago. I don't know why, and I can't find her. It's been too long."

Ji-yoo's head snapped up, his usual playful demeanor instantly replaced by a look of alarm. "What? The forest? Why would she go in there? Okay, I'll go look for her." He was already turning to head towards the entrance.

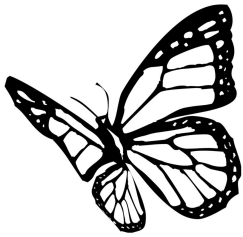
"I'm coming too," Joon-ho said, his usual teasing tone absent.

"Me too," Dong-hyun added, his quiet voice filled with concern.

"Of course, me too!" Hye-jin exclaimed, her eyes wide with worry.

So-mi looked at the small group, a hint of guilt mixing with her determination. "Okay, then. Me too."

Chapter 46: Lee Gyeong Hu



I sat nestled at the base of a large tree, the cool earth seeping through my jeans. The forest was quiet, save for the rustling of leaves and the distant chirping of birds. "Fifteen minutes for the break, and five have already passed," I murmured to myself, a knot of anxiety tightening in my chest. "When will So-mi come back with Ji-yoo?" I sighed, leaning back against the rough bark, the initial confidence in So-mi's plan starting to waver. Was this a terrible idea? What if he didn't come?

Suddenly, I heard a chorus of voices calling my name. "Gyeong-hu!" Hye-jin, Dong-hyun, and So-mi's voices echoed through the trees. Then, a more urgent, deeper voice cut through, "Princess!" It was Ji-yoo. And finally, Joon-ho's teasing drawl, "Ji-yoo's princess!"

I stood up, a nervous energy coursing through me. Taking a deep breath, I stepped out from behind the tree. "I'm here," I said, my voice a little louder than intended.

Hye-jin gasped, her hand flying to her chest dramatically. "Gyeong-hu! You scared us half to death! What were you doing all the way in here?"

Dong-hyun, ever the quiet observer, just looked relieved. So-mi, however, wore a wide, slightly too innocent smile. "Yeah, Gyeong-hu! We were so worried! What happened?"

Joon-ho, never missing an opportunity for theatrics, clutched his heart. "My delicate sensibilities! I thought the forest had claimed our fair maiden!"

Ji-yoo, however, just stood there for a moment, his eyes raking over me, a mixture of relief and something else I couldn't quite decipher in their depths. Then, he let out a long breath. "Princess! What in the world were you thinking? You just disappeared!" His voice was rough, edged with a concern he usually tried to hide.

"Umm," I stammered, trying to come up with a plausible excuse on the spot. "I… I saw a really pretty butterfly! And I just followed it… further than I meant to." I cringed inwardly at how ridiculous it sounded.

So-mi snorted, trying to stifle a laugh. Hye-jin raised a skeptical eyebrow. Joon-ho, of course, pounced on it. "A butterfly, you say? A magical, kidnapping butterfly of the deep, dark woods?"

"It was very sparkly!" I insisted weakly, shooting So-mi a silent glare.

Ji-yoo, however, seemed to buy it, or at least he wasn't pressing the issue. He stepped closer, his hand reaching out to gently cup my cheek. "Are you okay? Did anything happen?" His touch was surprisingly tender.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said, my gaze locking with his. For a fleeting moment, the playful banter of our friends faded into the

background, and it was just the two of us, a silent understanding passing between us.

So-mi cleared her throat loudly, breaking the moment. "Well, butterfly chasing aside, we should probably head back before Mr. Park thinks we've all been abducted by woodland creatures."

Joon-ho chuckled. "Speak for yourself, So-mi. I have a certain allure to the forest folk." He struck a ridiculous pose, earning an eye-roll from Hye-jin.

As we all started walking back towards the hotel, Ji-yoo kept me close, his hand lightly resting on my back. He didn't say anything more about the "butterfly," but the worry in his eyes, the gentle touch… it spoke volumes. Maybe So-mi's ridiculous plan wasn't so ridiculous after all.

Mr. Park's voice echoed through the small gathering, announcing it was time to head back to the buses. I climbed into the 11th-grade bus and settled back into my previous window seat. The image of Ji-yoo's worried expression, the gentle touch on my cheek… it replayed in my mind. A soft smile bloomed on my lips. "He loves me," I murmured to myself, the realization a warm wave washing over the lingering anxiety of the past few weeks. The ridiculous butterfly chase, So-mi's slightly insane plan – it had all been worth it. The walls around his heart, I was sure, were finally starting to crumble. The mountain air suddenly felt a little crisper, the anticipation for the next three days even more exciting.

Lost in the warm glow of my newfound certainty, the journey to the Western Velmora Mountains passed in a dreamy haze. The changing scenery outside the window barely registered as my mind replayed Ji-yoo's worried eyes and the gentle touch of his

hand. It was noon when the bus finally pulled up to the hotel, a quaint building nestled amidst the towering pines. As we disembarked, stretching our limbs and taking in the crisp mountain air, I was blissfully unaware that the beauty surrounding us was about to become the backdrop for a cruel twist of fate, a turn in my life I could never have foreseen. The joy bubbling within me was a fragile thing, poised on the precipice of a storm I couldn't yet see gathering on the horizon.

Yun Sa-ri nudged my arm gently. "Let's go," she said, a friendly smile on her face.

"Yes," I replied, returning her smile, though my gaze kept drifting towards where Ji-yoo's bus should have been. Everyone from our bus had already disembarked, the excited chatter filling the mountain air. But their bus was late. A knot of unease tightened in my stomach, a prickle of worry amidst the anticipation. Strange, unsettling thoughts flickered through my mind – had something happened?

Finally, the familiar sight of their bus rounding the bend brought a wave of relief, a smile instantly spreading across my face. I watched, eager to see Ji-yoo. He was one of the first to step off, his eyes scanning the crowd until they found mine.

"Princess," he said, a relieved smile mirroring my own as he walked towards me. "Sorry we took so long. There was some… traffic." He didn't elaborate, but the fact that he was here was enough.

"It's okay," I said, my heart doing a little flutter at the sight of him. "I was just… glad you made it."

He reached out and gently tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Wouldn't miss this for the world," he murmured, his gaze lingering on mine for a moment.

Just then, Mr. Park's voice boomed through the crowd. "Alright everyone, gather around! Gather around!" He clapped his hands to get our attention. "Now that everyone has finally arrived, I need to go over a few ground rules for this trip. Rules that I expect you all to follow diligently."

He cleared his throat and began listing them off, each one sounding more restrictive than the last. "Firstly, curfew is at 10 PM sharp. No one is to be outside their rooms after that time. Secondly, absolutely no wandering off alone. You must always be in groups of at least three. Thirdly, and this is very important, there is to be no consumption of alcohol or any other prohibited substances. Anyone caught doing so will be sent home immediately." He continued, his voice stern, "And finally, I expect respectful behavior towards the hotel staff and the environment. We are guests here."

I groaned inwardly. Curfew at 10 PM? Groups of three? No wandering off alone? This was sounding less like a fun mountain trip and more like a tightly controlled school excursion. I glanced at Ji-yoo, who was making a face of mock exasperation. This was going to be harder than I thought.

Mr. Park's final pronouncement hung in the air like a heavy cloud. "And one more thing," he emphasized, his gaze sweeping over the assembled students. "If any boy and girl are found together in a romantic or sexual manner, they will face immediate suspension from school."

My breath hitched. My eyes instinctively flicked to Ji-yoo, and a wave of apprehension washed over me. Suspension? That was serious. But then, a rebellious spark ignited within me. Three days. Three days of being this close to him, surrounded by the breathtaking beauty of the mountains… the risk suddenly seemed worth it. A small, daring smirk tugged at the corner of my lips.

Across the small distance separating us, I saw Ji-yoo's lips curve into a matching smirk, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken challenge, a shared thrill of defiance. The rules were clear, the consequences dire, but the pull between us, the undeniable magnetic force that had been drawing us together for so long, felt stronger than any threat of suspension. The mountains loomed in the distance, promising both adventure and a clandestine intimacy. The game had just gotten a whole lot more interesting.

The trip commenced with a chaotic rush for lunch. The hotel dining hall buzzed with the excited chatter of teenagers. Ji-yoo and I managed to snag a table in a relatively quiet corner.

"Those rules are such a buzzkill," I grumbled, picking at my plate of 김치볶음밥 (kimchi fried rice).

Ji-yoo leaned back in his chair, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Tell me about it, princess. Looks like we'll have to get creative."

"Creative how?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He smirked. "Where there's a will, there's a way. Besides," he lowered his voice, "a little danger just makes things more exciting, doesn't it?"

After lunch, the highlight of the afternoon was supposed to be boating on the picturesque lake. Several brightly colored paddleboats bobbed gently on the water. But Mr. Park's next announcement deflated the budding romantic atmosphere. "Alright everyone, listen up! For the boats, we'll be making pairs of two. All girls with girls, and boys with boys."

I shot Ji-yoo a look that clearly conveyed my displeasure. *What the actual heck?* This was a deliberate attempt to keep us apart. I marched over to Mr. Park, putting on my most earnest, teacher's-pet face.

"Mr. Park?" I said politely.

He turned, a kind smile on his face. "Yes, Lee Gyeong-hu?"

"Mr. Park, I was just thinking," I began, feigning concern, "if you made pairs of one girl and one boy, it might be more efficient. Girls aren't always as strong at paddling, and boys are generally stronger. But it's okay, of course, it's your decision. I was just offering some advice. After all, who am I to question the methods of the best teacher in our school?" I laid on the compliments thick, knowing Mr. Park had a soft spot for flattery.

His chest puffed out slightly. "Oh! Well, yes, I suppose you have a point, Gyeong-hu. I am rather insightful, aren't I? Alright students, new plan! Make pairs of one girl and one boy per boat!"

I rejoined So-mi, who gave me a conspiratorial wink. "You're good at this, girl," she chuckled.

"I know," I replied with a grin.

Ji-yoo smirked as I approached, holding out his hand. We climbed into a bright red paddleboat, the old reel camera clutched in my other hand.

As we paddled away from the shore, the laughter and splashing of the other students faded into a gentle murmur. The sun dappled on the water, creating a shimmering, romantic ambiance.

"You're quite the negotiator, princess," Ji-yoo said, his eyes admiring.

"Only when it's for a good cause," I replied, a playful smile on my lips.

We paddled in comfortable silence for a while, enjoying the scenery. Then, Ji-yoo leaned closer, his voice low and husky. "You know, being out here… it feels like we're the only two people in the world."

"It does," I agreed, my heart doing a little flip.

He reached out and gently took my hand, his thumb stroking my knuckles. "Remember that night at your house? When you had a fever?"

I nodded, a warmth spreading through me.

"I was so worried," he confessed, his gaze intense. "More worried than I've ever been about anything."

"You were?" I asked softly.

He squeezed my hand. "Princess," he said, his voice earnest, "you're… you're different. You get under my skin in a way no one

else ever has." He paused, searching for the right words. "You make me… want things I never thought I wanted."

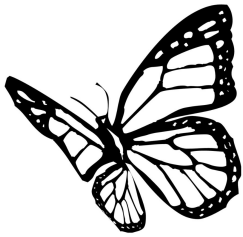
My breath hitched. "Like what?" I whispered.

He leaned even closer, his eyes locked on mine. "Like… keeping you close. Always."

I felt a blush creep up my neck. I fumbled with the camera. "Let's… let's take a picture," I said, a little flustered but wanting to capture this moment.

We posed awkwardly, our hands still intertwined, the beautiful lake and mountains forming a stunning backdrop. Ji-yoo, despite his usual cool demeanor, had a soft, almost shy smile in the photos. As the afternoon sun began to dip towards the horizon, casting a golden glow over everything, we continued to paddle, the silence between us filled with a comfortable understanding, a silent promise of something more. The click of the camera reel capturing those precious moments felt like sealing a secret, a memory just for us.

Chapter 47: Lee Gyeong Hu



The clock on the wall of our shared hotel room ticked slowly towards 10 PM, Mr. Park's stern voice echoing in our ears, "Alright everyone, go to your rooms!" I plopped down on my bed with a sigh of exaggerated boredom. Hye-jin, thankfully my roommate, mirrored my sentiment, collapsing onto her own bed with a groan.

"Ugh, I don't wanna just sleep," I complained, stretching my arms above my head. "I was practically comatose on the bus."

Hye-jin nodded in agreement. "Me too! This is supposed to be a trip, not a giant slumber party." A mischievous glint sparked in my eyes.

"Hye-jin," I said, a playful smile spreading across my face.

"Yes?" she replied, her own curiosity piqued.

"Let's have some fun." The words hung in the air, a silent promise of teenage rebellion against the stifling rules. The night was young, we were in the mountains, and the allure of a little adventure was far more tempting than the prospect of a premature bedtime.

Standing outside So-ah's room, a thrill of mischievous anticipation coursed through me. Hye-jin stood beside me, her eyes sparkling with amusement. I crept towards the door and gave a soft, almost hesitant knock. Then, as planned, Hye-jin and I darted away, ducking behind a large potted plant down the hallway, stifling our giggles.

The door creaked open, and So-ah emerged, her face a mask of pure annoyance. Knowing So-mi, she had probably already had a few choice words for So-ah's usual unpleasantness. "Who is there?" So-ah hissed, her eyes scanning the empty hallway. Hye-jin and I held our breath, our laughter bubbling just beneath the surface. "Idiot," So-ah muttered under her breath before slamming the door shut.

We exchanged a look and burst into silent chuckles, clutching our hands over our mouths to muffle the sound. "Okay, your turn," I whispered to Hye-jin, nudging her forward.

Hye-jin, equally enthused, tiptoed to the door and rapped sharply. Just like me, she ran back and hid beside me. The door swung open again, and So-ah's voice, even more irritated this time, echoed down the hall. "Who the motherfucker is there?!"

We were practically shaking with suppressed laughter. Taking a deep breath, I whispered loudly, my voice echoing slightly in the quiet hallway, "I am here… to take you… my So-ah."

So-ah's eyes widened, darting around frantically. "Wh-who is there?" she stammered, a tremor of fear creeping into her voice. She took a hesitant step out into the hallway, peering into the shadows. That was my cue. I dramatically draped a white shawl over my head, letting it billow slightly behind me, and slowly emerged from behind the plant.

So-ah's eyes fixed on my ghostly figure, and a bloodcurdling scream ripped from her throat. "AHHHHH! Ghost!" Without a second thought, she turned and bolted down the hallway, her footsteps echoing as she fled, presumably out of the hotel altogether.

Hye-jin and I collapsed into each other, our laughter finally erupting, loud and unrestrained. Our silly prank had worked far better than we could have imagined. The image of So-ah's terrified face and her hasty retreat was pure comedy gold.

We slipped back into So-ah's room, still giggling. So-mi looked at Hye-jin and me, a knowing smirk on her face. "You're here? And So-ah… she screamed." A beat of silence, then understanding dawned in her eyes. "Oh! So my two brave friends came to rescue me from that… delightful individual."

"Yeah, we did our civic duty," I said, trying to suppress another wave of laughter.

Meanwhile, chaos had erupted outside. So-ah, clearly traumatized, was putting on a full theatrical performance for the hotel staff. "There's a ghost! I saw a ghost!" she wailed, pointing dramatically down the hallway.

The bewildered staff tried to calm her down. "No, ma'am, there's no ghost here. You must have imagined it."

"No, I didn't! It was right there!" she insisted, her voice rising in hysteria. Eventually, Mr. Park was summoned to deal with the commotion. In the midst of So-ah's dramatic pronouncements, the news of a "ghost" sighting spread like wildfire among the students. Soon, exaggerated tales of spectral figures and eerie moans filled the air, everyone playing along with the ridiculous story.

Mr. Park, looking utterly bewildered by the escalating situation, finally made an announcement. "Alright everyone! Due to… unforeseen circumstances… we will be having an impromptu camping trip tonight! Until the hotel management can… ascertain the situation regarding the… uh… 'ghost'." A collective groan went up from some, while others, undoubtedly the ones in on our prank, exchanged amused glances. Camping under the stars suddenly seemed like a much more appealing option than a ghost-infested hotel.

Under the vast expanse of the star-dusted sky, huddled around a crackling makeshift campfire, our little group felt a world away from the chaotic hotel.

"You know," Hye-jin began, her gaze sweeping over our faces, a knowing smile playing on her lips, "this 'ghost'… I have a feeling it's not someone we don't know."

Joon-ho clutched So-mi's arm dramatically, his voice a theatrical whisper. "Ahhh, so you mean the spectral being… is among us?" He squeezed her arm with mock terror. "Save me, my goddess!"

I chuckled, shaking my head at his antics. So-mi just rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath, "Drama king."

Hye-jin continued, her eyes twinkling. "And honestly? This ghost sounds… surprisingly beautiful."

Ji-yoo's head snapped towards Hye-jin, a flicker of genuine curiosity in his eyes. "Now *I'm* intrigued. This beautiful ghost… tell me more."

So-mi grinned, turning to me with a mischievous glint. "Oh, she's our sweet little ghost. Full of surprises."

Ji-yoo's eyes widened, realization dawning on his face. "Wait… so it was *your* plan? Seriously, princess? I never thought my little teacher's pet had it in her to pull something like this." A slow, impressed smile spread across his face.

I gave him a playful shrug. "I *was* a good girl. You're the one who corrupted me the day we became friends."

He let out a deep, hearty laugh, the sound echoing in the still night air. "Impressive," he conceded, his eyes sparkling with amusement and something else… admiration?

"Well," So-mi declared, clapping her hands together, "since our little ghost has been revealed, we should commemorate this historic night!" She rummaged in her backpack and pulled out my reel camera. "Picture time!"

We all huddled together, the flickering firelight casting dancing shadows on our faces. Joon-ho struck a series of ridiculous poses, earning groans and laughter in equal measure. Hye-jin and Dong-hyun stood slightly apart, a comfortable shyness between them. So-mi made sure everyone was in the frame, her arm slung around Joon-ho's neck. When it was just Ji-yoo and me, he pulled me close, his arm wrapping around my shoulders, his gaze warm and lingering. As I pressed the shutter button, capturing the moment on the grainy film, I couldn't help but smile. This chaotic, unexpected night under the stars, surrounded by laughter and the undeniable spark between us, felt like a memory I would cherish forever. The "ghost" had brought us all closer, and in the process, had revealed a new, bolder side of me to the boy I was falling for.

The crackling campfire cast a warm, inviting glow, drawing our little group closer like moths to a flame. Everyone settled around

it, the playful energy of the "ghost" prank slowly giving way to a more relaxed atmosphere. I found myself a little apart from the others, leaning against a fallen log, the vast expanse of the starlit sky stretching above me.

After a few comfortable minutes of shared silence, Ji-yoo excused himself from the group and came to sit beside me, the warmth of his presence a comforting contrast to the cool night air.

"Penny for your thoughts, princess?" he asked softly, his gaze drifting upwards to the constellations.

I smiled, turning to look at him. "Just thinking about how crazy this trip has been already."

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. "Crazy good, though, right?" He turned his head, his eyes meeting mine in the soft firelight.

"Definitely memorable," I agreed, a hint of a smile playing on my lips. The air between us felt different now, charged with an unspoken intimacy that the chaos of the day had momentarily overshadowed.

He reached out, his fingers gently brushing against mine where they rested on the log. "You know," he began, his voice low and earnest, "tonight… seeing you come out from behind that bush, all… ghostly…" He paused, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "It was… unexpected."

"Unexpectedly good?" I teased, my heart doing a little flutter at his gaze.

He chuckled again, his thumb now gently stroking the back of my hand. "Definitely unexpectedly… *you*. You surprise me, Gyeong-hu. In the best way possible."

A warmth spread through my chest. "Is that a compliment, Mr. Kim?"

"Take it as you will, princess," he replied, his eyes sparkling in the firelight. He leaned a little closer, his gaze intense. "But seriously… that whole thing with So-ah? That was… bold."

"Maybe I'm not such a good girl after all," I murmured, my voice barely a whisper.

He leaned even closer, his breath warm against my ear. "Maybe not," he whispered back, his eyes never leaving mine. "And maybe… that's what I like about you most."

The world around us seemed to fade away, the crackling fire and the distant chatter of our friends becoming a muted backdrop to the intense connection between us. His thumb continued its gentle caress, sending shivers down my arm. The unspoken feelings that had been simmering beneath the surface for so long felt like they were finally on the verge of overflowing. The vast, silent mountains seemed to hold their breath, waiting for what would happen next.

I stood up abruptly, a sudden urge to be alone with my thoughts, with the lingering warmth of Ji-yoo's words. I walked away from the flickering campfire, the darkness of the surrounding trees enveloping me. Almost immediately, I sensed his presence behind me, his silent pursuit a familiar comfort.

I stopped near a large, moss-covered rock, the silence of the night amplifying the sound of our breathing. He stepped closer,

gently turning me to face him, his hands reaching out to frame my face. "You know, princess," he murmured, his voice low and husky, his eyes tracing the contours of my face in the dim starlight, "you're looking especially beautiful tonight."

A blush warmed my cheeks. "Do I?" I whispered, my gaze locked with his.

He smiled, a genuine, unguarded smile that always made my heart skip a beat. And then he kissed me, a soft, tender kiss that quickly deepened, a silent expression of the unspoken feelings that hung between us. I kissed him back with equal fervor, the cool night air contrasting sharply with the sudden heat that flared between us. His hands moved from my face to the nape of my neck, his thumbs gently caressing the sensitive skin, and then lower, leaving a trail of soft love bites along my collarbone.

Suddenly, a faint rustling sound broke the stillness, followed by a hushed voice that seemed to come from the nearby trees. We froze, pulling apart, our eyes wide. Ji-yoo's hand instinctively went to my arm, a protective gesture. He glanced around, his senses alert.

"Did you hear that?" I whispered, a shiver running down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

"Yeah," he replied, his voice low. "Stay here." He moved silently towards the direction of the sound, melting into the shadows. I held my breath, my heart pounding in my chest, waiting anxiously. After a few tense moments, he returned, shaking his head.

"Nothing," he said, his brow furrowed. "I didn't see anyone. Maybe it was just an animal."

A lingering unease remained, but the moment had passed. We walked back towards the warm glow of the campfire, rejoining our friends, the shared intimacy of our stolen moment now tinged with a touch of mystery. The rest of the night unfolded around the crackling flames and whispered conversations, but the memory of Ji-yoo's touch and the strange, fleeting sound in the darkness stayed with me as sleep finally claimed us under the watchful eyes of the silent stars.

Chapter 48: Kim Ji Yoo

The warmth of the campfire was starting to fade as the night deepened, our conversations lulled by the peaceful silence of the mountains. I felt a gentle weight settle on my shoulder. Gyeong-hu had drifted off to sleep, her head resting comfortably against me. Her soft breathing and the trusting way she leaned on me sent a wave of unexpected tenderness through me. I let her sleep, content just to hold her close in the quiet darkness.

After a while, Mr. Park's voice, amplified by the stillness of the night, announced, "Alright everyone, the… 'ghost problem' has been resolved. Please make your way back to your respective rooms."

I looked down at Gyeong-hu, her face peaceful in her sleep. Gently, I shook her shoulder. Her eyelids fluttered open, and she looked up at me, her eyes still hazy with sleepiness. "Princess, time to go back to our rooms," I said with a soft smile.

"I don't wanna go," she mumbled, snuggling closer.

I chuckled softly. "But you have to, sleepyhead."

She sighed dramatically, but a small smile touched her lips as she finally sat up. The logistics of the room assignments

suddenly hit me. My room was with Dong-hyun. Dong-hyun and Hye-jin were siblings. And Hye-jin was Gyeong-hu's roommate. This could get complicated.

I glanced at Joon-ho, hoping he had some brilliant plan. He just shrugged, a helpless look on his face. "Dude, I don't have any idea right now. We'll see tomorrow."

With a resigned sigh, I walked Gyeong-hu to her room, watching as she disappeared inside. Then, I headed to my own room, the prospect of sharing with a probably already asleep Dong-hyun feeling strangely anticlimactic after the closeness I had shared with Gyeong-hu by the campfire. Tomorrow, I'd have to figure out a way to spend more time with her, away from prying eyes and ridiculous rooming arrangements.

I slipped back into the quiet of our hotel room. Dong-hyun was sprawled on his bed, deeply asleep. The lingering heat from my kisses with Gyeong-hu still pulsed within me, a restless energy that made sleep feel distant. I headed into the bathroom, the cool tile a stark contrast to the warmth still radiating from my body. A few stolen moments of self-pleasure chased away the immediate tension, leaving me clean and finally ready to succumb to sleep.

Morning arrived with the soft glow of dawn filtering through the curtains. Dong-hyun was still lost in slumber as I showered, the warm water washing away the last vestiges of sleep. Standing by the window, I gazed out at the majestic mountains, their peaks bathed in the golden light. "I don't wanna go…" Gyeong-hu's sleepy voice echoed in my mind, a sweet and vulnerable sound that tugged at something deep within me.

Then, Joon-ho's words from the game store flashed back: "The mountain trip is the perfect opportunity to just… finish it. It's the kind of setting where she's likely to say it. Just… get it over with." A strange unease settled in my chest. My heart, for reasons I couldn't fully articulate, had started to beat differently for Gyeong-hu. The thought of manipulating her, of reducing our connection to a mere win in a stupid bet, now felt repulsive. My internal conflict raged, my thoughts a chaotic storm louder than the gentle sounds of the awakening mountain. The bet… I didn't want to finish it anymore. The realization hit me with the force of a sudden gust of wind.

At 9 AM, the dining hall buzzed with the chatter of hungry students. I made a beeline for Gyeong-hu's table, a sense of possessiveness rising within me as I spotted So-ah, my ex, sitting at a nearby table, her gaze fixed on Gyeong-hu with what looked suspiciously like jealousy. I ignored her, focusing solely on Gyeong-hu. Slipping my hand under the table, I gently took hers. I felt her breath hitch slightly, a subtle tremor in her fingers, but she didn't react, maintaining the carefully constructed wall of our secret. I watched as she awkwardly navigated her breakfast with her left hand.

So-mi, ever observant, noticed the unusual switch. "Weren't you right-handed, Gyeong-hu?" she asked casually, a curious glint in her eyes.

Gyeong-hu choked slightly on her food. "No… umm… no, I'm left-handed," she replied a little too quickly, her cheeks flushing slightly.

"Okay," So-mi said slowly, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "Maybe you are." She then continued eating her breakfast, her gaze occasionally flicking between Gyeong-hu and me.

My own gaze drifted to Gyeong-hu's neck. Nestled against her skin, catching the morning light, was the silver locket with the small butterfly – the one I had given her on her birthday. A warmth spread through my chest, a feeling far more significant than any fleeting victory in a stupid bet.

"Ji-yoo," Gyeong-hu said softly as we strolled through the bustling market, her eyes fixed on mine.

"Yes, princess?" I replied, my hand instinctively reaching for hers.

She stopped, her hand reaching into her bag. "I have something for you," she said, her expression a mix of nervousness and anticipation.

"What is it?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

She pulled out a carefully folded sweater, the dark blue and lighter blue wool soft against my fingers as she handed it to me. "This is for you," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

I unfolded it, the simple yet thoughtful design hitting me with unexpected force. "You… you made this?" I asked, my eyes widening in disbelief, tracing the slightly uneven stitches that spoke of her effort.

She nodded, her gaze earnest. "Ji-yoo, you were the one who motivated me to chase my dream, my singing. And the way you came to give me medicine when I was sick… this is just a way to say thank you. Thank you for coming into my life, Ji-yoo."

I stared at her, a wave of conflicting emotions crashing over me. This girl… why did she have to be so genuinely good? Every manipulative thought, every calculated move I had made felt like

a punch to the gut. She had even saved my grandfather, the only person who had ever truly shown me unconditional love.

"Why… why a sweater?" I managed to ask, still stunned by her selfless gesture.

She took a deep breath, her eyes searching mine. "I saw you. You were sad because your mother didn't call, didn't do anything a mom should do… or at least, what you think a mom should do. Maybe she was busy, Ji-yoo." She looked at me, her sincerity radiating. "So I made this. Not because I'm trying to be your mother, but because I want to tell you… I care about you so much, Ji-yoo."

Her words hit me like a physical blow. Yes, she cared. More than I deserved. At that moment, I wanted to smile, to pull her into a tight embrace, but a bitter anger towards myself choked the impulse. The sweater felt heavy in my hands, a tangible weight of my own failings.

"Gyeong-hu," I said, my voice rough, unable to meet her gaze. "I'll be back. Just… stay with the group. Be safe." And before she could respond, I turned and walked away, the weight of the hand-knitted sweater a heavy burden in my hands.

Lying on the cool earth, surrounded by the hushed whispers of the woods, the hand-knitted sweater felt heavy, a tangible weight of guilt and self-loathing. "How did you even make it?" I whispered into the rustling leaves, the question directed at the absent figure of Gyeong-hu. "How many times did you prick your fingers raw?" My gaze traced the slightly uneven stitches, each one a testament to her effort, her care.

"How many times did you have to hide it, a secret project tucked away from your mother's watchful eyes?" My fingers followed the

lines of the dark blue and lighter blue, imagining her clandestine efforts. "How many stolen moments, in the quiet corners of your room, maybe even… in the bathroom?" The thought of her sacrificing her precious privacy, enduring small injuries, just to create this for me, twisted the knife of my regret deeper.

I turned my face away, the rough bark of a nearby tree pressing against my cheek. "But I don't deserve it," I choked out, the words heavy with self-recrimination. "I don't deserve your kindness, your effort… I don't deserve *you*, Gyeong-hu." A bitter laugh escaped my lips. "I'm not worthy of that pure heart, that unwavering care. I'm just… a mess. A selfish, manipulative mess."

My grip tightened on the sweater. "Every touch, every stolen kiss, every whispered word… it was all tainted by that stupid bet. And you… you just kept giving. Giving without expecting anything in return. And what did I do? I took. I took your trust, your vulnerability, your… your affection, and I treated it like a game." A wave of shame washed over me, hot and suffocating. "You see the best in me, Gyeong-hu, but all I see is the worst in myself. And the worst part is… you still care." The realization was a crushing weight. "I'm so sorry. Sorry for everything."

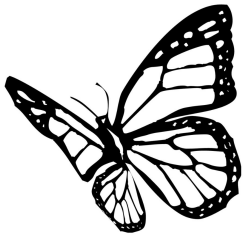
"You know what, Gyeong-hu?" I said, my voice gaining a newfound resolve, the weight of my guilt slowly being replaced by a fierce protectiveness. "I can't break your heart. I won't. I will never. I'm not going to complete this fucking bet. I'll bow down to those idiots, admit I lost. It doesn't matter anymore."

A genuine smile touched my lips as I looked at the hand-knitted sweater in my hands. "I can't hurt this little butterfly," I murmured, the dark and light blue wool suddenly seeming to represent the depths and lightness within her.

I looked up at the vast expanse of the sky, the stars beginning to pepper the twilight. "I don't believe in God," I confessed to the silent heavens, "but when I look at you, Gyeong-hu… I can't deny that there might be something out there. Something that created a soul as pure as yours." The realization settled within me, a quiet certainty. I wouldn't let anything, least of all my own foolishness, tarnish that purity.

I carefully pulled the soft wool sweater over my head, the familiar scent of laundry detergent and something uniquely *Gyeong-hu* enveloping me. It felt warm, comforting, a tangible representation of her care. A genuine smile spread across my face. "I will wear this," I murmured, the thought of seeing her reaction, that bright, genuine smile of hers, chasing away the last vestiges of my self-doubt. With a newfound lightness in my step and the weight of the sweater a comforting presence, I turned and headed back towards the warm lights of the hotel, ready to face her, ready to finally be worthy of that pure heart.

Chapter 49: Lee Gyeong Hu



A knot of worry had been tightening in my stomach ever since Ji-yoo had walked away after I gave him the sweater. "So-mi," I asked, my voice laced with concern, "he left right after I gave him the sweater. Do you think he didn't like it? Did I say something wrong?"

So-mi looked at me, her expression thoughtful. Even she seemed a little unsure. But she tried her best to reassure me. "No, Gyeong-hu. He's just… like that sometimes. I've known him since we were little. When he's really happy or… processing something, he likes to be alone with his thoughts."

I clung to her words, but the whole day passed without Ji-yoo seeking me out. My worry grew with each passing hour, the beautiful mountain scenery doing little to soothe my anxiety. By 6 PM, the early mountain dusk was settling in as we stood outside the hotel, waiting for the dinner announcement. Just then, I saw him. Ji-yoo was walking towards us.

"Ji-yoo, where were you?" I blurted out, relief washing over me.

He turned to me, a soft smile gracing his lips. My eyes immediately fell on him. He was wearing it. My sweater. The dark blue and lighter blue wool looked perfect on him. I looked

up at his face, my heart swelling. "Thank you," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. "For wearing it."

He reached out and pulled me into a tight hug, holding me close. I hugged him back, burying my face in the soft wool of the sweater I had made. "Thank you, Gyeong-hu," he murmured into my hair, his voice filled with a sincerity I hadn't heard before. "Thank you for everything."

He pulled back, his gaze lingering on mine for a moment longer before he turned and walked over to Joon-ho, engaging him in a quiet conversation. I watched them, a sense of peace settling over me. He was wearing the sweater. That had to mean something.

He came back to me, So-mi still by my side, her arms crossed with a skeptical look. Ji-yoo leaned in, his eyes sparkling with a conspiratorial glint. "Princess, here's the plan. Dong-hyun will go into Joon-ho's room. Joon-ho will come into my room. And I will come into your room. So-mi, you come into Gyeong-hu's room and send Hye-jin into your room. Then I'll come into Gyeong-hu's room, and you come into my room with Joon-ho." He rattled off the complicated room swap with practiced ease.

So-mi stared at him, her jaw slightly dropped. "Wait, wait, wait! No way! I am *not* spending a night in the same room as Joon-ho!"

As if on cue, Joon-ho sauntered over, a teasing smirk on his face. "Why, goddess? Afraid you can't control yourself?" He chuckled, clearly enjoying her discomfort.

So-mi's cheeks flushed a delightful shade of red. "Oh, shut up, you… you!" she sputtered, unable to find a sufficiently insulting word.

Ji-yoo quickly stepped in to diffuse the situation. "Please, So-mi? Just for once? I just really want to spend some time with her." He glanced at me, a pleading look in his eyes, then back at So-mi.

She rolled her eyes dramatically, but a hint of a smile played on her lips. "Okay, fine. But you owe me big time, you love-sick puppy."

Ji-yoo grinned, relief washing over his face. He looked at me, then back at So-mi. "But be careful. Dong-hyun and Hye-jin don't know about any of this." The success of his elaborate plan hinged on our stealth and the obliviousness of our roommates. The night was about to get a lot more interesting, and a little bit risky.

We slipped into my hotel room, the quiet hum of the air conditioning a stark contrast to the hushed excitement thrumming between So-mi and me. Hye-jin was already in bed, her eyelids heavy with sleep. It was almost 10 PM, curfew looming.

A soft knock echoed on the door. I opened it to find So-mi standing in the hallway, a wide, conspiratorial grin on her face. "So, so, so…" she drawled as she stepped inside, her eyes dancing with mischief.

Hye-jin stirred in her bed, looking at So-mi with bleary eyes. "I have a makeup idea!" So-mi announced brightly, holding up an imaginary palette.

Hye-jin groaned and burrowed deeper under the covers. "This late at night? Come on, So-mi, I wanna sleep."

So-mi perched on the edge of Hye-jin's bed, undeterred. "So what, dear? I don't think Gyeong-hu wants to sleep." She winked at me.

"Yes, I'm not sleepy at all, truly," I chimed in, playing along.

So-mi turned back to Hye-jin, her tone persuasive. "But *you* can sleep in my room, Hye-jin. And the good thing is, So-ah is already out cold."

Hye-jin hesitated, a "but…" forming on her lips.

So-mi cut her off with a pleading look. "Please?"

Hye-jin finally sighed, the lure of a peaceful, So-ah-free slumber proving too strong to resist. "Okay," she mumbled, pushing herself up and shuffling towards the door.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind Hye-jin, I turned to So-mi, a playful smile on my face. "You're a good actor, So-mi."

Just moments after Hye-jin shuffled out the door, a soft tap echoed. I held my breath, a thrill of anticipation coursing through me, and quietly opened it. Ji-yoo slipped inside, a wide, sheepish grin on his face. So-mi gave us a knowing wink and mouthed, "Good luck!" before disappearing out into the hallway, presumably heading towards Ji-yoo's room.

The exchange was a carefully orchestrated dance of teenage rebellion. Ji-yoo had likely waited until he saw Dong-hyun head into Joon-ho's room before making his move. Joon-ho, ever the accomplice, would have then slipped into Ji-yoo's room, feigning sleep or engrossment in something to avoid suspicion when So-mi arrived.

Meanwhile, So-mi's journey to Ji-yoo's room was probably less stealthy. Knowing her, she likely strolled in with a casual air, perhaps humming a tune, hoping Joon-ho was prepared for her unexpected presence.

Inside Ji-yoo's room, Joon-ho was indeed there, sprawled on his bed, pretending to be deeply engrossed in a manga. The moment So-mi walked in, however, his eyes snapped up, a wide, mischievous grin spreading across his face.

"Well, well, well," he drawled, putting the manga down. "Look what the cat dragged in. Didn't expect my goddess to grace my humble abode tonight."

So-mi rolled her eyes, tossing her bag onto the spare bed. "Don't flatter yourself, drama king. This is a temporary arrangement, strictly for… strategic purposes."

"Strategic purposes, you say?" Joon-ho leaned back on his elbows, a playful glint in his eyes. "Intriguing. Perhaps we could strategize… other things?" He winked.

So-mi glared at him. "Don't even think about it, Joon-ho. One wrong move, and you'll be regretting ever volunteering for this 'strategic arrangement'."

"Volunteering?" Joon-ho feigned offense. "My dear So-mi, for the chance to share the same air as you? I consider it an honor, not a chore."

"Oh, please," So-mi scoffed, pulling out her pajamas. "You'd flirt with a lamppost if it stood still long enough."

"Only if it had your captivating glow, my dear," Joon-ho retorted smoothly, never missing a beat. "Speaking of glowing, are you sure you wouldn't like to borrow one of my oversized band t-shirts? Wouldn't want you catching a chill in this… less-than-goddess-worthy room."

So-mi just sighed, shaking her head as she headed towards the bathroom. "Just… be quiet, Joon-ho."

"Quiet as a mouse, my love," Joon-ho called after her, a wide, triumphant grin on his face. The night had only just begun, and for So-mi, tolerating Joon-ho's relentless flirting in the confines of a shared room promised to be a long and potentially hilarious adventure.

Meanwhile, in the quiet intimacy of my hotel room, Ji-yoo closed the door softly behind him, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "So, princess," he murmured, stepping closer, "ready?"

A playful smile bloomed on my lips. "What do you think?" I reached up, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

"Always eager, I know," he said, his hands finding my waist, his gaze possessive.

"Yeah, you're right," I whispered, my fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck.

He looked from me to the bed, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. "So, this is our first time… on a bed, right?"

A blush heated my cheeks. "Yeah, it is."

He leaned in close, his breath warm against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "You won't walk properly tomorrow, I promise."

I met his gaze, a thrill of anticipation mixed with a hint of daring. "Ruin me then," I whispered back, the words a silent invitation.

He pushed me gently back onto the bed, and I fell onto the soft mattress with a sigh. He followed me down, hovering over me, his hands reaching to pin mine on either side of my head. His kiss was immediate, hungry, a culmination of weeks of stolen touches and whispered desires. The world outside our small hotel room faded away as we lost ourselves in each other, the night unfolding in a passionate exploration, a dance of tangled limbs and breathless whispers, a promise of a night where sleep would be a distant afterthought.

He was really good in bed

Chapter 50: Kim Ji Yoo

I woke to a persistent pounding on the door, the rhythmic knocking dragging me from a deep, sated sleep. Gyeong-hu stirred in my arms, her eyelashes fluttering open. "What happened, Ji-yoo?" she mumbled, her voice still thick with sleep.

"I don't know, princess," I replied, my senses on high alert. The knocking continued, insistent and urgent. Gyeong-hu scrambled to put on her clothes, her movements hurried and a little panicked. I stood behind the door, ready to shield her if necessary.

She cautiously pulled the door open, and So-mi burst in, her face etched with worry. "Ji-yoo, you need to get back to your room!" she hissed, her eyes darting between Gyeong-hu and me.

"What happened?" Gyeong-hu asked, her voice trembling slightly.

So-mi looked at us, her urgency clear. "Someone told Mr. Park that there are two students spending the night together… you know… two couples. And now he's checking every room!"

"Okay, thanks for telling us, So-mi," I said quickly, grabbing my shirt and pulling it on. "Go on, princess." I gave Gyeong-hu a reassuring nod as I slipped out into the hallway and back to my own room.

Joon-ho was sitting up in bed, his eyes wide. "Dude! We were almost caught tonight! Thank God So-mi overheard Choi Min-jun telling Mr. Park!"

"Wait… Choi Min-jun?" I frowned, a cold realization dawning. "He knew it was me. He was trying to trap me so this stupid bet wouldn't be completed."

Joon-ho's face darkened with anger. "Not cool, dude. Not cool at all. I'm gonna kill him!" He was about to storm out of the room, but I grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"No, Joon-ho. Leave it. Okay?"

He let out a frustrated sigh. "I hate it when you stop me."

"We can't cause a scene, Joon-ho," I said firmly.

He glared at the door for a moment, then reluctantly nodded. "Okay. If you say so." The tension in the room remained thick, the near-miss a stark reminder of the precariousness of our secret.

The warm water cascading over me did little to wash away the vivid memories of the night before. Gyeong-hu's soft moans, the desperate whispers of my name – they replayed in my mind with intoxicating clarity. A smile tugged at my lips as I finally stepped out of the shower.

Joon-ho was sitting on his bed, looking restless. "Bro, let's just go out. Maybe some fresh air will clear our heads." I wanted to see Gyeong-hu, to reassure myself she was okay after the near-discovery, but Joon-ho was my best friend. I couldn't just brush him off. "Okay," I agreed.

Outside, Joon-ho took a deep breath. "Ahhhhhh, fresh air!" He managed a weak smile. "So… what actually happened between you and So-mi last night? Because I refuse to believe a girl was in your room and you two just… slept."

Joon-ho grimaced. "We had a *lot* of arguments, okay? Please don't remind me of all those savage comebacks she threw my way." I chuckled. "Oh, so it was *that* bad?"

He looked genuinely perplexed. "I don't know what's gotten into her. We were best friends, and all of a sudden… ah…" He trailed off, shaking his head in confusion. "Okay, listen," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Everything will be fine, Joon-ho. Don't worry." I offered him a reassuring smile. "I hope so," he replied, his voice still tinged with uncertainty.

Suddenly, a familiar, grating voice cut through the peaceful morning air. "Well, well, well."

I spun around to see Choi Min-jun, his usual smug expression plastered on his face, surrounded by his cronies. Joon-ho's eyes narrowed, his earlier frustration instantly replaced by anger. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Choi Min-jun sauntered towards me, a nasty smirk twisting his lips. "Having fun last night, were we, Kim Ji-yoo? Impressive how easily you trapped the teacher's pet."

Rage, cold and sharp, surged through me. "Next time, choose your words carefully when you speak about Lee Gyeong-hu," I said, my voice low and dangerous, a clear warning in my eyes.

He chuckled, unfazed. "You're so close to winning that bet, aren't you? Well, we're not going to let that happen."

Joon-ho stepped forward, his fists clenching. "Do whatever you want, just fuck off and leave us alone."

"Well, Ji-yoo," Choi Min-jun continued, his eyes glinting with malice, "I have to admit, you're good at trapping girls." Then, his gaze flicked towards where he assumed Gyeong-hu was, his next words dripping with venom. "But those kinds of sluts look good in bed."

Something inside me snapped. The casual cruelty, the blatant disrespect towards Gyeong-hu… I lost it. My fist shot out, connecting squarely with his cheek. He staggered back, a look of shock and pain flashing across his face.

His group immediately surged forward, a pack of angry hyenas. One lunged at me, but Joon-ho was there in an instant, shoving him back. "Touch him, and you'll regret it!" Joon-ho snarled, his own anger now fully ignited.

The fight erupted quickly and brutally. It was a chaotic mess of fists and angry shouts. One of Choi Min-jun's friends tried to sucker-punch Joon-ho, but I saw it coming and intercepted, my elbow connecting with his ribs. Another one came at me from the side, and I sidestepped, landing a solid kick to his stomach.

The adrenaline from the fight was still coursing through my veins as Choi Min-jun, clutching his bruised cheek, spat his final

threat. "I won't leave you, Ji-yoo. This isn't the end yet." Then he turned and fled, his remaining friends trailing after him.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, running a hand through my disheveled hair. Turning around, I froze. My mother. Standing just outside a nearby cafe, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock and… disgust? She was with a man, presumably the businessman my estranged father had mentioned, and her husband.

"Look at the kind of manners their parents gave them," she was saying, her voice laced with disdain, her gaze fixed on me. Her back had been to me during the fight, so she hadn't seen my face clearly. Her husband rolled his eyes dismissively.

Then, as I turned fully, her eyes widened further, recognition dawning. "Ji-yoo?" she said, her voice barely a whisper.

The businessman with them looked at her, surprised. "Mrs. Mae, you know him?"

My stepfather stood up, his eyes flicking nervously between my mother and me. He grabbed her hand, his grip tight. "He… umm… no, we don't know him, right, honey?"

My mother looked at him, a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes. But then, her gaze hardened as she looked back at me. I knew, with a sickening certainty, what was coming. "No," she said, her voice cold and firm. "I don't know him."

The anger I felt moments ago was instantly replaced by a crushing wave of sadness. She was denying me. Again. "No," I said, my voice raw with hurt. "Let me tell you who I am."

Her eyes flashed with a warning. "Leave, Ji-yoo. I said leave."

I couldn't move. My feet felt rooted to the ground, my heart aching with her rejection. Joon-ho, sensing my distress, gently grabbed my arm. "Come on, Ji-yoo," he said sadly. "No one here will understand."

He led me away, trying to steer me back towards the hotel. Gyeong-hu was there, her face etched with worry. "Come on, Ji-yoo," Joon-ho urged. "Let's go inside. You didn't even eat breakfast."

I shook my head, pulling my arm away from Joon-ho. "Don't come after me, anyone," I said, my voice flat and hollow. Then I turned and walked away, needing to be alone with the fresh wound her denial had inflicted.

But Gyeong-hu, her brow furrowed with concern, followed me. She trailed me silently until I reached a secluded spot, a beautiful clearing surrounded by the majestic mountains. The breathtaking scenery offered no solace. The pain was too deep, too raw. Tears, hot and unwelcome, finally spilled from my eyes.

Gyeong-hu's eyes widened as she saw my tears. "Ji-yoo… what happened?" she asked softly, stepping closer and gently wiping a tear from my cheek.

"Leave me now, Gyeong-hu," I pleaded, my voice choked with emotion. "Please."

She looked at me, her gaze unwavering, filled with a fierce protectiveness. "No, Ji-yoo," she said firmly. "I won't. Not when you're like this."

"Leave, Gyeong-hu!" I roared, my voice raw with pain and anger. "Just leave me alone! I'm not in my right mind! Just go!"

But she stood her ground, her voice ringing with a surprising strength. "I won't, Ji-yoo! I will never! You can shout all you want, but I'm not going anywhere!"

I spun around, my eyes blazing with a desperate fury. "Why are you even here, huh? Why the fuck are you here? When my own mother disowns me, why would *you* stay?"

Her eyes widened, a look of shock and hurt washing over her face. "Your mother… disowned you?"

Hot, angry tears streamed down my face. "No one loves me! Not even my own mother! Why am I even alive?" I turned away from her, my back to her, unable to bear the sight of her pity. "Everyone hates me. My own mother as well."

Suddenly, I felt her arms wrap around me from behind, a comforting warmth amidst the crushing coldness in my heart. I felt the wetness of her tears soaking into my back. "No one hates you, Ji-yoo," she sobbed, her voice thick with emotion. "You don't know how much you mean to me."

No… no, I knew what was coming. I felt it, a terrifying premonition. No, no, no, no, no…

"Ji-yoo," she whispered, her voice trembling, her grip tightening around me. "I… I love you."

My heart stopped. The world seemed to tilt on its axis. My hands turned ice-cold.

"I love you so much, Ji-yoo."

I swallowed hard, the confession hanging heavy in the air. Then, the sound of mocking applause broke the tense silence. I turned,

Gyeong-hu turning with me, to see Choi Min-jun standing there with his cronies, their faces smug and triumphant.

"Wow, what a drama," Choi Min-jun sneered.

"Choi, leave," I growled, my fists clenching.

"No, why should I? We're just here to congratulate our winner on finally getting the girl to say those three little words." He gestured towards me with a mocking bow. "Quite the master of manipulation, aren't you, Ji-yoo?"

Gyeong-hu looked from them to me, her brow furrowed in confusion. "What bet?" she asked slowly, her voice trembling.

"The bet where you had to make Lee Gyeong-hu hug you and say 'I love you'," Choi Min-jun announced, his voice dripping with malicious satisfaction.

"No, stop! Leave her alone!" I yelled, stepping forward.

One of Choi's friends chimed in, a cruel smile on his face. "And that's why he became your friend, sweetheart."

Gyeong-hu's eyes widened, her gaze fixed on me, searching for an answer. I took a step towards her. "Look, Gyeong-hu…"

She cut me off, her voice rising, laced with a desperate hope. "I know they're lying, Ji-yoo. Tell me they're lying. Please. Did you do this?"

I took another step closer. "Look, princess, I can explain—"

"Yes or no, Ji-yoo?" she interrupted, her voice cracking, the hope in her eyes starting to flicker and die.

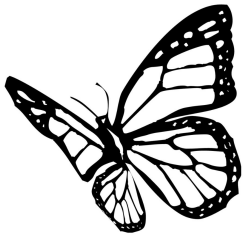
I swallowed again, the truth a bitter pill in my throat. "Yes," I finally choked out, my voice barely a whisper. "They're… right."

The color drained from her face. She went completely still, her eyes wide and unseeing, before a single tear escaped and traced a lonely path down her cheek. "Princess…" I whispered, reaching for her.

She sank to the ground, her legs giving way, more tears following the first, silent sobs wracking her body. Choi Min-jun and his group exchanged triumphant grins before finally leaving, their cruel game played out.

I stood there, frozen, watching her crumble. The sight of her tears, the raw pain in her eyes, was like a knife twisting in my gut. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't face the devastation I had caused. Turning away, I fled, leaving her alone amidst the beautiful, uncaring mountains, the weight of my betrayal crushing me.

Chapter 51: Lee Gyeong Hu



My vision blurred, the world dissolving into a hazy mess of tears. Ji-yoo was gone, just like that, leaving me shattered amidst the unforgiving beauty of the mountains. A sob escaped my lips, then another, and soon I was crying uncontrollably, the sound echoing in the stillness of the clearing.

"Princess…" His voice, the voice I had come to cherish, now echoed in my mind, a cruel reminder of his deception. "A butterfly for a butterfly…" More tears streamed down my face, each one a fresh wave of pain. "Happy birthday, princess…" I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the memories, the tenderness that now felt like a calculated lie.

"Stop!" I shouted into the empty air, my voice hoarse and broken. "Leave me alone!" The pain in my chest was unbearable, as if my heart had been ripped out and stabbed a million times over.

"Why is this butterfly sad?" His voice, a phantom whisper in my thoughts, twisted the knife deeper. "Oh God…" I choked out, clutching my chest. "Please… please make this a nightmare. Just a bad dream."

My cries grew louder, more desperate. Suddenly, I felt arms wrap around me, a familiar comforting presence. So-mi. Maybe Ji-yoo,

in a fleeting moment of guilt, had told her where I was. She held me tightly, her own concern radiating through her embrace.

"Gyeong-hu, what happened?" she asked softly, her voice filled with worry. She gently helped me stand, her grip firm.

"So-mi…" I choked out, my voice thick with tears. "He… he doesn't love me." A sob wracked my body. "He played with me."

She hugged me tighter, her arms a solid anchor in my crumbling world. I clung to her, burying my face in her shoulder, and cried until my body ached and my throat was raw, the sound of my heartbreak echoing through the silent mountains.

So-mi gently rubbed my back, her touch a small island of comfort in the vast ocean of my despair. "Gyeong-hu, please stop crying," she pleaded softly, her voice thick with concern. "Try to breathe, and tell me what happened."

I pulled back, gasping for air, my chest heaving with ragged sobs. Tears still streamed down my face, blurring my vision. "He… he made a bet, So-mi," I choked out, the words laced with disbelief and agony. "He made a bet… to make me fall in love with him. And… and he won."

A sharp intake of breath escaped So-mi's lips. Her eyes widened, reflecting my own shattered world. "Ji-yoo… what has he done?" she whispered, her voice filled with a mixture of shock and anger. She hugged me tightly again, her embrace a silent offering of support. "Okay, Gyeong-hu. It's okay to cry. I'm here for you. Always. I won't judge you. Just… let it all out. Everything in your heart."

I clung to her, my body trembling with the force of my sobs. "So-mi…" I gasped, my voice barely a whisper. "I… I feel like I'm

going to die. It feels like someone has killed me… a thousand times. Just… just tell me it's a dream, So-mi. Tell me it's a lie. Please." My voice broke, another wave of tears washing over me. The betrayal was a gaping wound, tearing through everything I had felt, everything I had believed. The love I had so readily given now felt like a cruel joke, a weapon used against me. The pain was all-consuming, a suffocating darkness threatening to swallow me whole.

The announcement to board the buses for our return journey felt like a cruel twist of the knife. The beautiful mountains, which just days ago held the promise of romance, now seemed to mock my pain. I found my usual window seat on the 11th-grade bus, the familiar view doing little to soothe the raw ache in my chest. My eyes were still red and swollen from the endless tears, but on the surface, a fragile calm had settled. Inside, however, a storm of sadness and betrayal still raged.

As the 12th-grade bus pulled up alongside ours, my eyes inadvertently met Ji-yoo's. He was in his usual window seat, his gaze fixed on me, a mixture of regret and something else I couldn't decipher in his dark eyes. A wave of anger, sharp and sudden, washed over me. I couldn't bear to look at him, to be reminded of his lies.

"Sa-ri," I said to the girl sitting beside me, forcing a small, polite smile, "would you mind switching seats with me? I'd really love to sit on this side."

She smiled back, oblivious to the turmoil within me. "Yes, sure! I love the window seat."

We swapped places, and I turned my head towards the passing scenery, my back now firmly facing Ji-yoo's bus. I knew he had

seen the deliberate move, understood the silent message. I didn't want to see him. Not now. Maybe not ever. The journey back to school felt long and heavy, each mile pulling me further away from the brief illusion of love I had so foolishly believed in.

Arriving home felt surreal, each step heavy with the weight of shattered illusions. The familiar comfort of my surroundings offered no solace. Six PM. The journey back had been a blur of forced composure and inner turmoil. "Yes or no, Ji-yoo?" His hesitant, damning answer echoed in my head: "Yes… they're… right."

My maid, a kind, familiar face, rushed towards me as I stepped inside. "Miss Gyeong-hu, you're back?" Her cheerful tone jarred against the storm raging within me.

I forced a weak, unconvincing "Yes," my voice betraying none of the devastation I felt. My carefully constructed facade held, but the effort was immense.

She beamed. "Okay, let me inform your mother." She turned to walk towards the cordless phone in the living room, but I couldn't bear the thought of facing her, of pretending everything was alright. I turned and fled, retreating to the supposed sanctuary of my room, where the silence only amplified the deafening roar of my heartbreak.

The shrill ring of the landline cut through the suffocating silence of my room. I glanced at the caller ID before picking up – So-mi. Even seeing her name brought a fresh wave of pain, a reminder of the friendship Ji-yoo had faked.

"Hello," my voice was a mere whisper, devoid of any life.

"Gyeong-hu, how are you feeling now?" Her voice was soft, laced with concern.

I managed a broken, humorless smile. "Just breathing. Hoping to die." A single tear escaped and traced a cold path down my cheek.

"Please, Gyeong-hu, please be strong," she pleaded, her voice trembling slightly. "You need to be strong… and for Ji-yoo… I never thought he could do this. He's been my friend since childhood. I never imagined… but he did a bad thing. I'm with you always, Gyeong-hu. And I won't let him get away with this. Especially that drama king Joon-ho – this is impossible, he doesn't know about it." She paused, a beat of silence before she asked, "Did you eat anything?"

I remained silent, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Hello? Gyeong-hu, are you there?" Her voice was laced with growing worry.

I slowly placed the receiver back in its cradle, the click echoing in the quiet room. I lay on my bed, my gaze fixed on the ceiling, tears silently escaping my eyes, one by one, each drop a testament to the shattering of my heart.

"Hello?" So-mi's voice continued to call out from the abandoned receiver, her increasingly frantic tone unanswered. Finally, after several unanswered pleas, she hung up, a heavy silence descending upon the line, mirroring the desolate emptiness in my soul. The world outside my room continued, oblivious to the quiet devastation that had taken root within me.

"Princess…" The endearment, once a sweet melody, now echoed in the silence like a cruel taunt. My heart pounded in my

chest, each beat a painful reminder of the love I had so freely given and so carelessly betrayed. "Princess…" I hated this feeling, this hollowness that had taken root inside me. A dark whisper of wanting it all to end flickered at the edges of my mind. "Princess…" Why? Why him? Why did I have to love him so much? "Butterfly…"

I stiffened, my senses on high alert. I heard footsteps approaching my room, the familiar rhythm telling me it was my mother. I squeezed my eyes shut, feigning sleep. I couldn't face her, couldn't muster the energy to pretend I was okay, to maintain the illusion of strength that was rapidly crumbling.

The door creaked open, and I felt her presence in the room. She came closer, her shadow falling over my face. "Gyeong-hu? Oh, you're sleeping." Her voice held a hint of annoyance, perhaps stemming from a difficult day. "Goodnight," she said, the words perfunctory before she turned and left.

I lay there, unmoving, the tension slowly draining from my body. I opened my eyes, the darkness of the room mirroring the darkness in my soul. I was weak, utterly and completely weak. The charade of strength was exhausting, unsustainable. But even in my brokenness, a stubborn instinct for survival remained. I had to keep lying. To everyone. That I was fine. That this didn't shatter me. That I would somehow find a way to piece myself back together. Even though, in the suffocating silence of my room, all I felt was the crushing weight of my shattered heart.

The morning sun cast long shadows across my bedroom floor, a stark contrast to the darkness that still clung to my heart. The thought of food was repulsive; the emptiness inside me felt far greater than any physical hunger. The door creaked open, and

my mother entered, her usual air of controlled annoyance radiating from her.

"Gyeong-hu," she said, her tone sharp.

"Yes, Mother?" I replied, my voice flat and devoid of emotion.

She looked at me, her lips pressed into a thin line. "So, you're finally back after all that 'fun'." The sarcasm dripped from her words. "Now, let's talk business." She produced a stack of my recent test papers, her eyes scanning them with displeasure. "What is this? Second position? And you hid this from me?"

I stared at her, the familiar disappointment in her voice a dull ache.

"You are clearly a useless child," she continued, her anger escalating. "Explain this to me. Why are you second?"

A tear escaped my eye, a solitary drop of the ocean of sadness within me.

"Stop crying, Gyeong-hu! Answer me!" she demanded.

I finally looked up at her, my gaze steady despite the trembling in my hands. She came closer, her presence looming over me.

"I said, answer!" she shouted.

I met her angry gaze, a flicker of defiance igniting within the ashes of my despair. "Mother," I said, my voice trembling but firm, "so what if I got second place? Am I not still your daughter?"

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "You are talking back to me?!"

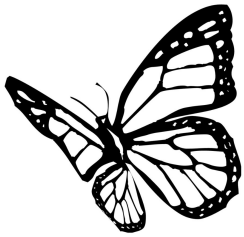
"Yes, I am!" I retorted, the dam of my pent-up emotions finally breaking. "From the very beginning, you've been mean! You always wanted me to be first, always! You always asked about my marks, never about me! Have you ever once asked, 'Gyeong-hu, you look sad, why?'" Tears streamed down my face, a torrent of years of unspoken hurt. My mother stood there, shocked into silence by my uncharacteristic outburst.

"Gyeong-hu, enough," she said, her voice surprisingly calm, but I couldn't stop the flood.

"You always cared about your work or my grades, never thought that Gyeong-hu is a human being! Never! You always put responsibilities on me, always!" I sobbed, the words tumbling out in a rush. "You never said, 'My dear daughter, let's go out, let's have some fun!' I always wanted to be a singer, but you never let me follow my passion. You forced me to be the teacher's pet! You made me crave love, crave freedom, and then others who saw my weakness… they took the opportunity!" I looked at her, my eyes filled with a bitter truth. "If I am in this condition, it's because of you, Mother. Only you."

She stared at me, her face a mask of shock. The room seemed to spin, the weight of my words, the sheer force of my emotions, overwhelming me. My vision blurred, the edges of the world fading into a swirling darkness. And then, silence. I lost consciousness, the darkness finally offering a temporary escape from the unbearable pain.

Chapter 52: Lee Gyeong Hu



My eyes fluttered open, the sterile scent of antiseptic filling my nostrils. The blurry white ceiling slowly came into focus, and I realized I was in a hospital room. My mother was there, her face etched with worry, her eyes red and swollen.

"Gyeong-hu," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

I sat up slowly, a wave of dizziness washing over me. She immediately hugged me, her embrace tight and filled with a raw emotion I had rarely seen from her. She was crying. "I am so sorry, my life," she sobbed, her voice breaking. "I am so sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you like that."

I looked at her, truly looked at her. Her worry was palpable, focused solely on me, not on my grades. "Mother," my voice was weak and raspy.

She pulled away slightly, cupping my face in her hands, her thumbs gently stroking my cheeks. "Yes, Mother is here. Tell me what happened to you."

I looked into her tear-filled eyes, and for the first time, I saw a depth of emotion I had long yearned for.

"You want to be a singer? Done. You don't want to study so rigidly? Done. You want to have fun? Done. I won't force you into anything anymore, my Gyeong-hu. Please, don't hate me. Everything I've done… it was for you. I wanted you to study for a good future. Yes, I accept that I was always too busy with work, but now… I promise you, nothing will stay like before." She hugged me again, her face nuzzling against the crook of my neck. "Nothing will stay like before," she repeated, her voice muffled.

I hugged her back, the years of unspoken resentment melting away in the warmth of her embrace. "Mother," I whispered, tears welling up in my own eyes, "I am sorry for being like that too. I regret everything I said. I love you, Mother. And I am so sorry." The dam of my emotions finally broke, and I clung to her, the shared tears a testament to the fragile, yet enduring, bond between a mother and daughter.

In that hospital room, amidst the scent of antiseptic and the warmth of my mother's unexpected embrace, a quiet resolve settled within me. I would live for my family, for the newfound understanding with my mother. I wouldn't waste any more tears on someone who had proven unworthy of them.

My mother looked at me, her eyes gentle. "What happened, my dear? You can tell me. I'm your mother, and I can see something is wrong." She offered me a small, reassuring smile. I wanted to confide in her, to unburden my heart, but the shame of the bet, the raw pain of Ji-yoo's betrayal, felt too heavy to share, at least not yet.

"Ahhh…" I hesitated, unsure how to answer.

Just then, the door swung open, and So-mi rushed in, her face a picture of exaggerated remorse. "She got into a fight with me!" So-mi declared dramatically, looking directly at my mother. "Hello," she added, giving a slight, respectful bow.

My mother looked from So-mi to me, a bemused smile on her face. "A fight? With you?"

So-mi nodded emphatically. "Yes! Umm…" She rushed to the edge of my bed, taking my hand. "I am so sorry, Gyeong-hu! Forgive me, please!" she pleaded, her performance Oscar-worthy.

My mother chuckled softly, looking at me with a knowing smile. "I never thought my daughter was so sensitive. Well, now that she's apologizing so sincerely, you should forgive her."

I played along, a small, genuine smile finally gracing my lips. "I am sorry too, So-mi. I was being rude. I'm sorry."

So-mi threw her arms around me in a tight hug, pulling back with a relieved sigh. "It's okay," I said, returning her smile, a fragile sense of normalcy returning to the room, masking the storm that still lingered beneath the surface.

The doctor entered the room, a kind smile gracing his face. My mother stood respectfully as he approached my bedside. "Oh, so you're awake, Miss Lee? You gave your mother quite a scare," he said gently as he began to check my vitals. "How are you feeling now?"

"Better," I replied, my voice still a little weak.

"Your blood pressure was low, and you had a high-grade fever," he explained, looking at the readings. "Haven't you been eating anything?"

"Umm, no. I haven't. I wasn't really in the mood to eat," I admitted, avoiding my mother's gaze.

"Okay," the doctor said, his expression firm but gentle. "Well, make sure you eat now, and eat properly from now on." He turned to my mother, who was watching him with concern. "So, can I take her home now?" she asked.

The doctor smiled reassuringly. "Yes, everything looks normal now, just a bit of weakness. You can take her home. But please ensure she gets plenty of rest and nutritious food."

"Alright then," my mom said, a relieved sigh escaping her lips. She gathered my things, her movements quick and efficient. "Let's get you home, my dear. You need some proper rest and a good, home-cooked meal."

So-mi trailed behind us as we left the hospital, her usual bubbly demeanor subdued with concern. "Are you sure you're okay, Gyeong-hu?" she asked softly, her hand gently touching my arm.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I replied, managing a weak smile. The physical weakness was still there, but a flicker of something stronger was beginning to ignite within me. The fog of heartbreak was starting to lift, replaced by a quiet determination. I would heal. I would be okay. And I would face whatever came next, stronger for having weathered this storm. As we stepped out into the bright afternoon sun, the world felt a little less bleak, a tiny seed of hope beginning to sprout in the barren landscape of my heart.

Chapter 53: Kim Ji Yoo

I sat on a park bench near our school, the familiar surroundings offering no comfort. Joon-ho was beside me, his attempts to get me to eat a bag of chips proving futile. "No, Joon-ho, I don't want to eat," I mumbled, my gaze fixed on the ground.

"Dude, you're gonna kill yourself," he said, his voice laced with concern.

"So let me die," I retorted, the words laced with a bitter anger directed at myself.

Suddenly, So-mi appeared, her face a storm of fury and tears. She launched herself at Joon-ho, hitting him repeatedly on the arm. "Why did you both do this? Why?" she sobbed, her voice cracking with emotion.

Joon-ho looked genuinely contrite. She turned her tear-filled gaze on me. "Saying you're useless, Joon-ho, is an understatement right now." She walked towards me, her anger palpable. "But you, Ji-yoo? I never thought you would do this." She wiped furiously at her tears. "You crushed a pure soul. Gyeong-hu, the girl who never gave a damn about any guy… you played with her." Her voice trembled with fury. "She doesn't

even know the first thing about love. She just learned to love… and you broke her trust."

She stepped close, grabbing the collar of my shirt, her grip tight. I didn't resist, didn't meet her gaze. Shame burned within me.

"Why, Ji-yoo? Why?" Tears streamed down her face. "You were her first love." Her voice cracked. "Now she's in the hospital… because of you."

The words hit me like a physical blow, stealing the air from my lungs. "What happened to her?" I choked out, my worry a sharp, agonizing pain.

She released my collar, her eyes filled with a cold fury. "She's alive, don't worry. But you killed the Gyeong-hu we knew."

"Please, So-mi, tell me what happened," I pleaded, my voice desperate.

She looked at me, her expression a mixture of disgust and sorrow. "She lost consciousness and got a high-grade fever. Because of you. Just because of you." Then, she turned and walked away, leaving me and Joon-ho in the silent park, the weight of her words crushing me.

I stormed out of the park, my anger and worry a tangled mess inside me. I swung my leg over my bike, the familiar weight a small anchor in the storm. I jammed my helmet on, the click echoing the finality of my decision.

"Where are you going?" Joon-ho yelled, running after me, his voice laced with panic.

"I'm going to Gyeong-hu," I shouted back, my voice tight. "I need to see what happened to her. Just once. I just want to see her face." I reached for the ignition.

Joon-ho was quick, his hand snatching the key before I could start the engine. "Ji-yoo, leave her alone. Please," he pleaded, his eyes filled with a desperate concern. "She's already hurt enough."

"Joon-ho, I just want to see her. Just for once," I repeated, my voice cracking with a raw need.

He placed a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm. "I know you're regretting what you did. But this wasn't entirely your fault. You said you wouldn't complete the bet because you didn't want to hurt Gyeong-hu. This all happened because of Choi Min-jun."

I looked at him, the anger slowly giving way to a weary resignation. He was right. My impulsive actions wouldn't make things better.

"Tomorrow," Joon-ho continued, his voice softer now, "you can see her at school. Just… apologize. Make an effort for her forgiveness."

I stared at the key in his hand, then back at his earnest face. A heavy sigh escaped my lips. "You're right," I conceded, the fight draining out of me. He was right. For now, I needed to stay away. For her sake.

"Will she forgive me?" The question hung in the air, heavy with doubt and a desperate yearning for redemption.

Joon-ho looked at me, his gaze steady and honest. "Yes, she will. But you have to earn it. It won't be easy. You'll need to show her, with your actions, how truly sorry you are."

He then shifted his focus, a familiar note of concern creeping back into his voice. "But right now, you need to eat something. Otherwise, you're going to end up in the hospital too, you idiot. Please, Ji-yoo." He held out the packet of chips he had tried to give me earlier.

I looked at the crumpled bag, then at Joon-ho's worried face. A small nod was all I could manage. I took the chips and started to eat, the salty crunch a small, grounding sensation in the swirling vortex of my regret. The path to forgiveness would be long and arduous, but for the first time since everything had fallen apart, a tiny sliver of hope flickered within me. I had to try. For Gyeong-hu.

The next day, I woke with a singular purpose: to face Gyeong-hu. For the first time in a long time, I took extra care with my appearance, making sure my uniform was crisp and my hair was neatly styled. It felt like preparing for a crucial battle, my heart pounding with a mixture of hope and dread.

I saw her near the entrance of the school, surrounded by So-mi, Hye-jin, and Dong-hyun. To my surprise, she was laughing, her demeanor seemingly normal, just like any other day. Taking a deep breath, I approached them, my voice barely above a whisper. "Hey."

She turned to look at me, and I saw a flicker of hurt in her eyes, quickly masked by a practiced smile. "Oh, hello," she said, her tone surprisingly light. "How are you?"

Her normalcy took me aback. So-mi, standing beside her, looked utterly stunned. "I'm fine. And you?" I managed to say, my voice a little shaky.

She smiled, a bright, almost too-bright smile. "I'm fine too. What possibly could happen to me, huh?"

Hye-jin, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension, chimed in, "Guys, let's just bunk class. I don't wanna study."

Gyeong-hu turned to Hye-jin, her smile widening. "Not today. I actually want to study… sometimes." Then, her gaze flicked back to me, the smile still in place, but her eyes held a sharp, knowing glint. "Some things are just a complete waste of time," she said, the words directed squarely at me.

I wasn't scared by her anger, though I knew it was there, simmering beneath the surface. It was her unsettling normalcy that sent a shiver down my spine. I knew, with a chilling certainty, that a storm was brewing, and her calm exterior was merely the deceptive stillness before the tempest.

Later that day, I spotted Gyeong-hu in the school garden, her figure solitary amidst the vibrant blooms. A single red rose caught my eye, its velvety petals a stark contrast to the turmoil in my heart. I plucked it, its thorns pricking my fingers, a fitting reminder of the pain I had inflicted.

I approached her, my footsteps hesitant. "Gyeong-hu."

She turned, and the raw hurt in her eyes was like a physical blow. Yet, a small, polite smile touched her lips. "Yes, Ji-yoo?" That smile… it was a carefully constructed mask, and it hurt more than any anger could.

I held out the rose. She took it, her fingers brushing mine, a touch that once sent shivers of excitement now felt cold and distant. "Sorry," I mumbled, the word inadequate to express the depth of my regret.

She looked down at the rose, her smile unwavering, but her eyes held a chilling intensity. "This rose… how much time did the gardener give it? How much effort did he put into growing it?" Her gaze lifted, meeting mine, the same polite smile still there, but the hate in her eyes was unmistakable. "But you didn't think twice about breaking it, did you?"

I swallowed hard, the metaphor hitting me with brutal clarity. "Princess, I am—"

"Gyeong-hu," she corrected me, her voice cool and distant. "My name is Lee Gyeong-hu."

"Okay, Gyeong-hu," I repeated, the unfamiliarity of her full name a stark reminder of the distance I had created. "I am sorry."

She offered another one of those hollow smiles. "Can you fix the flower again? Make it like it was before?"

I looked at the delicate petals, the broken stem. "No," I admitted, my voice barely a whisper. "I can't."

Her gaze was unwavering, filled with a profound sadness. "Yes," she said softly, her voice laced with a quiet resignation. "I know you can't. Because you only know how to break things, Ji-yoo. You don't know how to heal." She turned and walked away, the red rose clutched tightly in her hand, a symbol of something beautiful, carelessly destroyed. And I stood there, watching her go, the weight of her words crushing me.

As school ended that day, a desperate hope propelled me towards Gyeong-hu's house. The air was crisp with the approaching Christmas and the bite of winter. I parked my bike across the street, the familiar ache of her absence a heavy weight in my chest. Giving two sharp blasts of the horn, a silent code between us from happier times, I waited, my gaze fixed on her window.

After a few agonizing minutes, the curtain twitched, and she appeared. The anger and sadness in her eyes were like a physical blow, the absence of her usual bright smile a stark reminder of my betrayal. She turned and disappeared back into the house, the curtain falling shut like a final, decisive act.

But I couldn't leave. Not yet. Joon-ho, who had followed me on his own bike, shivered beside me. It was nearing 11:00 PM, the cold seeping through our jackets. "Come on, Ji-yoo, don't be crazy. It's freezing. Let's go home."

"You go home, Joon-ho," I said, my voice firm despite the tremor in my hands. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm not moving an inch. I know she'll come back to the window. I know her."

Joon-ho looked at me, his expression a mix of pity and exasperation. "Dude, she's seen you from the window countless times already. She's ignoring you."

Just then, soft flakes of snow began to fall, dusting the street and the bare branches of the trees. Joon-ho sighed. "Look, even the snow is telling you to go home."

Then, I saw her. Gyeong-hu was back at the window, her eyes widening slightly as she saw me still there, unyielding in the falling snow. Slowly, deliberately, I reached into my bag and pulled out the dark blue and light blue sweater she had knitted

for me. I put it on, the soft wool a small comfort against the biting cold. I looked up at her, my eyes filled with a deep regret and something more… a love that felt both foolish and enduring. The silent standoff continued, the falling snow a silent witness to the chasm I had created between us.

I looked at Gyeong-hu, and the raw pain etched on her face mirrored the agony in my own heart. She couldn't bear to see me suffering, I knew it, just as I felt the crushing weight of her hurt. My life had become the pursuit of her, and now I couldn't even find her shadow. I was the architect of this desolate landscape between us, and my heart ached with a regret so profound it felt like a physical wound.

She was a precious stone, and I had been the fool who carelessly chipped away at her brilliance. Fear gnawed at me – not that someone else would steal her, but that I had already lost her. Just one chance. That's all I craved. One chance to prove I could be better, the man she deserved. Please, just appear, touch my hand, let me feel that connection again. The bond between us was something unique, something inexplicable.

"Ji-yoo, let's go," Joon-ho said softly, his voice laced with concern.

I kept my gaze locked on Gyeong-hu's window as I replied, "Go if you want, but I won't leave my princess." I sank to the ground, crossing my arms, my resolve hardening against the biting cold.

Joon-ho sighed, but then a familiar stubbornness settled on his face. "No," he said, sitting down beside me, mirroring my posture. "I'm not going either. I'm with my best friend in his fight." The snow continued to fall, a silent blanket covering our vigil, a

testament to a love that had been tested by foolishness but refused to be extinguished.

Gyeong-hu turned from the window, the finality of her movement a sharp pang in my chest. The light in her room went out soon after, plunging that small part of the world into darkness. But even in the darkness, I knew she wasn't sleeping. Just like me, she was likely replaying the memories, the laughter, the lies, the heartbreak. The silence between us was a heavy, tangible thing, filled with unspoken words and unshed tears.

Joon-ho, bless his loyal heart, eventually succumbed to the cold and the late hour, his head resting heavily on my shoulder. That was the way friendships were back then. A silent understanding, a fierce loyalty that transcended words. If your friend was hurting, you hurt with them. If they were facing a battle, you stood shoulder-to-shoulder, even if the only weapon you had against the darkness was your unwavering presence. The biting wind and the falling snow were relentless, but I stayed put, Joon-ho's weight a small comfort, my gaze fixed on the darkened window, a silent vigil for a love I desperately hoped wasn't lost forever.

The morning sun, a pale gold against the snow-dusted landscape, finally managed to pierce through my weary eyelids. I shifted, my stiff muscles protesting, and Joon-ho stirred beside me, his head lolling sleepily. "It's morning?" he mumbled, his voice still thick with sleep.

"Yeah," I replied, my gaze already fixed on Gyeong-hu's window. And then, she appeared. She was tying her hair, already dressed in her school uniform, clearly preparing for the day. She opened the window, likely expecting only the crisp morning air, and her eyes widened in shock as they landed on me. The

realization that I had stayed there all night hung in the cold air between us. But then, she was gone, disappearing from view.

I stood up, my body aching, a wave of dizziness washing over me. Joon-ho grabbed my arm as I swayed. "You've got a fever, Ji-yoo," he said, his brow furrowed with concern.

"I'm fine," I insisted, my voice raspy.

He looked at me, his expression exasperated. "No, you're not. You need rest. Don't be stupid."

"I'm fine," I repeated stubbornly. "I have to go to school. I'm a man, I'm fine."

Joon-ho just shook his head, a weary sigh escaping his lips. "And this man is getting crazy." He looked at me, his eyes pleading. "Where are you going now?"

"School," I answered, my gaze fixed on the direction of Gyeong-hu's now-closed window. Joon-ho just sighed. He knew there was no stopping me.I started my bike and headed towards school.

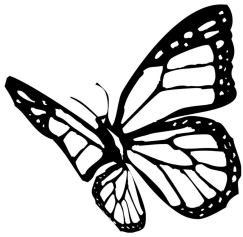
Before I could even pedal away, the world swam before my eyes. The streetlights blurred into hazy halos, and a wave of dizziness washed over me. I swerved, the bike wobbling precariously, and Joon-ho yelled, grabbing onto my arm. We narrowly avoided colliding with a parked car, the near miss jolting me slightly.

"You okay, Joon-ho?" I mumbled, my head swimming.

"Yes, I'm okay," he replied, his voice tight with alarm. "But you, bro? No. I'm not listening to you anymore. I am taking you to the

hospital. Now." His grip on my arm tightened, his determination unwavering. The argument was over. My body, finally succumbing to exhaustion and fever, offered no resistance.

Chapter 54: Lee Gyeong Hu / Kim Ji Yoo



"I'll be back, I want to get some water," I told Hye-jin and So-mi, forcing a casual tone.

"Okay," Hye-jin replied, engrossed in a magazine.

"Come back fast," So-mi added, her eyes still carrying a hint of suspicion whenever the topic of Ji-yoo arose.

"Okay," I promised with a small smile, trying to appear unconcerned. I walked towards the water cooler, the familiar ache in my chest a constant companion. As I reached it, Joon-ho came running into the school hallway, his face frantic.

"So-mi! Where's Gyeong-hu?" he asked breathlessly, skidding to a halt in front of her.

So-mi looked at him, surprised by his urgency. "Why do you want to know?" she asked, her voice still sharp with lingering anger towards him and Ji-yoo.

"Just tell me! It's important! It's about life or death!" Joon-ho exclaimed, his eyes wide with worry.

"She went to get water, by the water cooler," So-mi said, pointing down the hallway. Joon-ho didn't wait for another word; he turned and sprinted in that direction.

I was just finishing my drink, the cold water a momentary distraction, when I heard his frantic voice. "Gyeong-hu!"

I wiped my mouth and turned to see Joon-ho rushing towards me, his face pale with worry. "What? Not enough drama from that bet, Joon-ho? What's the new act?" I said, my tone laced with sarcasm, trying to mask the flicker of unease his panic sparked within me.

He looked at me, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "Ji-yoo… Ji-yoo is in the hospital, Gyeong-hu. And he's just… he keeps saying your name. Please… just meet him. Just once."

I sighed, a sound that held more weariness than worry. I still suspected a ploy, another attempt to manipulate me. "Okay," I said slowly, "but So-mi is coming with me."

Joon-ho looked at me, relief washing over his features. "Okay, okay. Take her with you. Just… please, hurry."

Joon-ho led the way through the sterile hospital corridors, his usual lightheartedness replaced by a somber silence. "So-mi, you stay here. I'll be back," I said, my voice flat. I glanced at Joon-ho. "And you too."

I stepped into the room. Ji-yoo was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, no IV drip attached. His eyes lit up with a fragile hope as he saw me. We stood there, a chasm of hurt and betrayal separating us, yet an undeniable tension pulling us together. A small, tentative smile touched his lips, a silent

acknowledgment of my presence. I looked at him, the anger warring with a reluctant pang of concern. He did look unwell.

"Gyeong-hu," he said softly, his smile wavering slightly. "Don't worry, I'm fine." He looked at me, a hopeful question in his eyes. "After everything… you're still here for me?" A flicker of happiness crossed his face. "I feel so happy."

But the memory of his deceit was a cold weight in my chest. *I hate you, Ji-yoo.*

"Gyeong-hu, believe me," he continued, his voice earnest, regret etched on his features. "Before you came into my life, it was just… useless. No emotion, nothing. The day you entered my life, everything changed… and I broke your heart." He swallowed hard. "I just want to say I am sorry, Gyeong-hu. Please, take your anger out on me. Say whatever you want. Slap me as many times as your heart tells you." He even grabbed his ear in a gesture of self-punishment. "But just… just once, accept my apology."

I looked down, my anger a tight knot in my stomach. "Sorry?" I finally said, my voice laced with disbelief. I looked up at him again, the anger still burning, and saw a flicker of fear in his eyes. I turned away. "Giving me that rose? Sitting outside my house all night? All that was for… this 'sorry'? Huh? Am I right, Ji-yoo?" He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the floor. "Good," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Very good. But don't delude yourself into thinking this is all for me." I pointed a finger at him. "This is all for you." He remained silent, his eyes downcast. "Because you've fallen in your own eyes, and now you just want to rise again. That's why you're doing all this." I

paused, a bitter laugh escaping my lips. "And when all your methods fail, you resort to this pathetic act of being sick? Huh?"

I stepped closer, my voice rising with each word. "Just once, look inside yourself, Ji-yoo. In your heart. There's no place for anyone else there, is there?" His regret was palpable, but it didn't soften my resolve. "And you're doing this because you want to be free from your sin. But it won't happen. What did you think, Ji-yoo? 'I broke Gyeong-hu's heart, I made a mistake, I said sorry, Gyeong-hu forgave me. I've taken a bath in holy water, now I'm sin-free. Finish. Everything ends'?" I gave a cold, humorless smile. "But no, Ji-yoo. Everything is not finished yet. And it will never end. Not with a 'sorry,' and not with any rose."

He looked utterly ashamed, unable to meet my gaze. "Do you even know what you've done?" Tears welled in my eyes. "Did you even realize it?" He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the floor. "You don't know," I whispered, turning away, tears finally spilling down my cheeks. "Because of you… I might never fall in love again. I might never trust anyone again. Because of you." My voice broke, a soft sob escaping my lips. I pointed a trembling finger at him. "Because of you." I pressed a hand to my forehead, more tears falling.

He looked utterly ashamed, unable to meet my gaze. "Do you even know what you've done?" Tears welled in my eyes. "Did you even realize it?" He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the floor. "You don't know," I whispered, turning away, tears finally spilling down my cheeks. "Because of you… I might never fall in love again. I might never trust anyone again. Because of you." My voice broke, a soft sob escaping my lips. I pointed a trembling finger at him. "Because of you." I pressed a hand to my forehead, more tears falling.

He took a hesitant step towards me. "Gyeong-hu…"

I recoiled, stepping back sharply. "Shut up!" I shouted, my voice raw with pain. "Just shut up! Today, I will speak, and you will listen. Because you don't even know what first love is for a girl." I looked away, the memories flashing through my mind. "First love is a sweet dream, a beautiful memory." I looked back at him, the anger returning. I wiped my tears with a trembling hand. "For herself, from her family… but she can also fight the whole world for her love." I looked away again. "That whole dream… I saw it with you." I turned back, my eyes blazing. "But what did you do, huh? You played an act of fake love and said a fake 'I love you'…" I looked straight into his eyes, my voice trembling with the weight of those words. "Those aren't just three words, Ji-yoo. My heart beat a hundred times before I could say them." I looked away, then back at him, the question hanging heavy in the air. "Was your love… just a lie? A cruel joke? A stupid bet?"

"Ji-yoo," I said, my voice trembling with the force of my anger and pain, "that wasn't a mistake. That was a sin." I looked at him, my eyes burning with unshed tears. "A sin," I repeated, my voice rising to a shout. "A cold-blooded, whole-heartedly planned sin." I turned away, unable to bear the sight of him.

"You know what, Ji-yoo?" I continued, my voice thick with bitterness. "If I ever say 'I love you' to anyone again, I will see your face on theirs. I will remember your betrayal. My trust isn't just broken from first love, Ji-yoo. My trust… it's finished. Gone. Vanished from the very word 'love'." I turned back to him, and he stood there, his head bowed in shame. "My trust is shattered like a glass, broken into so many pieces that the sound of its breaking will stay in my ears for the rest of my life." His regret was a palpable thing, hanging heavy in the sterile air.

"I made just one mistake in my life, Kim Ji-yoo," I said, pointing a trembling finger at him. "And that mistake… was you. You won't get free from the weight of your sin for the rest of your life, because I won't get free from my pain." I wiped another tear that escaped my eye. "I will live with this pain my whole life, and you will have to live your life with this weight." He looked at me, his eyes filled with a profound sadness. "The pain in my heart is because of you, Ji-yoo. And you… you will always stay there."

I turned away, the sobs wracking my body. He didn't move, didn't dare to. The memories of his touch, his words, still echoed in my mind, a cruel counterpoint to the reality of his betrayal. He was still in my heart, a painful, unwanted presence. I couldn't deny it. I still loved him. But at that moment, the hatred I felt for him burned even hotter than the embers of that lingering love.

Her tears were like shards of glass piercing my heart. As she cried, my own tears began to fall, a silent testament to the depth of my regret. My hand instinctively reached for her shoulder, a desperate plea for connection, but she flinched away, her rejection a physical blow. She turned and walked out of the room, leaving me standing there, hollowed out by her pain.

I sank to the cool, sterile floor of the hospital, the cold seeping through my thin clothes, mirroring the chill in my soul. I cried, a raw, unrestrained sound that surprised even myself. I had never broken down like this, not in front of anyone. But one stark truth had become undeniable: I had fallen for Gyeong-hu. I loved her. Truly, deeply loved her. And the thought of losing her was a torment I couldn't bear.

After a few minutes, Joon-ho entered, his eyes widening in surprise as he saw me on the floor, tears streaming down my face. "What happened, dude? You're crying here, and Gyeong-hu left in tears."

I looked up at him, my voice thick with emotion. "Joon-ho… I love her. I really love her."

He managed a weak smile. "So… why are you crying? Isn't this something to… well, not cry about?"

"But she hates me now," I choked out, turning away, unable to meet his gaze. "I lost her." A fresh wave of despair washed over me. "I can live with her hate, maybe… but I can't live knowing that she won't ever be truly happy because of what I did."

Joon-ho knelt beside me, trying to offer some semblance of comfort, when suddenly, Harabeoji entered the room. I saw him, stood up abruptly, the shock on his face mirroring my own turmoil. "Ji-yoo! What happened?" Harabeoji asked, his voice sharp with concern. Joon-ho had apparently informed him about my hospital visit. "I… um… nothing, Harabeoji," I mumbled, turning away, trying to wipe away the evidence of my breakdown.

"Ji-yoo, tell me what happened," Harabeoji insisted, his gaze unwavering.

Joon-ho stepped in, his voice placating. "Um, Harabeoji, he's just got a bit of a fever. Nothing much to worry about."

Harabeoji shot Joon-ho a knowing glance, a silent communication passing between them that Joon-ho clearly understood, as he fell silent. Harabeoji placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. I turned to him, my eyes still brimming with tears. "Look, Ji-yoo," he said softly, his voice filled with a warmth that had always been a constant in my life, "I've always been more than just a Harabeoji to you. I've been your friend, a cool grandfather. Tell me what happened."

The dam finally broke. I couldn't hold back any longer. I hugged him tightly, burying my face in his familiar embrace, and I cried. I told him everything. The bet, my growing feelings for Gyeong-hu, the devastating moment of revelation, her pain, her anger… everything.

Harabeoji looked at me, his eyes filled with a deep sadness, then a flicker of anger. "Ji-yoo, why didn't you tell me this before? About your mother… about my daughter disowning you?" He looked away, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "She did wrong. Terribly wrong. And I will definitely scold her for this. She made a grave mistake. But Ji-yoo…" He looked back at me, a gentle smile softening his features. "Gyeong-hu is a nice girl. Not just because she saved me, but because she always thinks about others before herself. That's a rare quality, Ji-yoo."

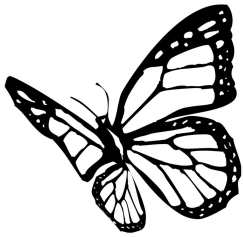
I nodded, my throat tight with emotion. "I know, Harabeoji. And I regret everything. I love her. I've never loved anyone like this before. She… she means everything to me."

He looked at me, his eyes filled with understanding. "Ji-yoo, you made a mistake. A big one. But I am happy that you recognize it.

That you know you were wrong. And I will suggest you do everything in your power to earn her forgiveness. Because this isn't just about your feelings, Ji-yoo. It's about her whole life, her ability to trust and love again. You hurt her deeply."

I met his gaze, my own filled with a newfound determination. "Yes, Harabeoji. I will. I promise. I will do whatever it takes."

Chapter 55: Lee Gyeong Hu



The days that followed were a blur of quiet sorrow and a growing numbness. The initial sharp edges of pain began to dull, replaced by a heavy, persistent ache. I retreated into myself, the vibrant world around me fading into a muted gray.

Then, Ji-yoo's efforts began. Every evening, as dusk painted the sky in shades of orange and purple, he would appear outside my house. Sometimes he would simply stand there, his gaze fixed on my window, a silent, forlorn figure in the twilight. Other times, he would leave small gifts on the doorstep – a single perfect red rose, a box of my favorite chocolates, a worn cassette tape of a song I once mentioned I loved.

Each offering was a fresh stab of pain. The rose, once a symbol of potential romance, now felt like a cruel reminder of his lies. The chocolates tasted bitter, coated with the aftertaste of betrayal. The music, once a source of joy, now echoed with the ghost of his false affection.

I threw them away. Each discarded gift was a small act of defiance, a way of trying to sever the invisible threads that still connected us. But the memories… those were harder to discard.

The worst part was my singing. Music had always been my sanctuary, my way of expressing the emotions that words often failed to capture. But now, every melody, every lyric, seemed tainted by his presence. Every time I opened my mouth to sing, his face would flash before my eyes, his fake smiles, his false praises. The joy had been leached out of it, replaced by a hollow ache. Slowly, agonizingly, I stopped singing. The silence in my room became another heavy blanket, suffocating the last vestiges of my former self.

One evening, I saw him standing by the gate, a small, wrapped package in his hands. I watched from behind the curtains as he hesitated, then gently placed it on the ground before stepping back, his eyes searching my window. I didn't move, didn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me. After a long, silent vigil, he finally turned and walked away, his shoulders slumped with defeat.

Later, after he was gone, I cautiously opened the door and picked up the package. Inside was a small, intricately carved wooden butterfly, its wings spread in delicate detail. A note was tucked beneath it, written in his familiar handwriting:

Gyeong-hu,

I know words are not enough. I know I broke something precious. But please believe me when I say that the feelings I have for you now… they are real. This butterfly is a reminder of your beauty, your spirit. I hope, someday, you can see past my mistakes.

Ji-yoo.

I held the butterfly in my hand, the smooth wood cool against my skin. It was beautiful, undeniably so. A pang of something akin to sadness, mixed with a stubborn resentment, twisted in my chest. He was trying. I could see that. But the chasm he had created felt too wide to bridge with a few heartfelt words and small gestures. The trust was gone, shattered beyond repair. And the silence in my room remained, heavy with the unspoken words and the unsung melodies.

But despite the wall I tried to build around my heart, the love I had felt for Ji-yoo hadn't completely vanished. It lay dormant, a faint ember beneath layers of hurt and anger. I threw away the roses, the chocolates, the tapes – tangible reminders of his attempts to win me back. But the notes… I couldn't bring myself to discard them. I tucked them away in a hidden corner of my drawer, their words a painful echo of a past I couldn't entirely erase. And the butterfly, the delicate wooden carving… it sat on my bedside table, untouched. So did the silver locket he had given me on my birthday, a bittersweet memento of a time when his smiles felt genuine.

One morning, the Christmas holidays stretching out before me like a vast, empty landscape, I went downstairs. My mother was animatedly instructing someone, her voice carrying through the hallway. As I reached the living room, I stopped short, my breath catching in my throat. Ji-yoo was there.

My mother turned, a bright smile on her face. "Look, Gyeong-hu! I wanted to introduce you. This is Park Chul. He's agreed to help out around the house for the Christmas period. So many of our regular staff have taken leave, but Mr. Park was happy to step in. And the best part is, he'll stay on until after the New Year's party!"

How could I tell my mother? How could I explain that this polite, seemingly helpful young man was the one who had shattered her daughter's heart? And why was Ji-yoo lying? He wasn't Park Chul. He was doing this… he was here, in my house, pretending to be someone else, just to stay near me, to try and worm his way back into my life. The audacity of it took my breath away. A wave of conflicting emotions – anger, disbelief, and a flicker of something akin to reluctant curiosity – washed over me. This Christmas holiday was about to become a lot more complicated.

"Nice to meet you, Gyeong-hu," Ji-yoo said, offering a polite bow, his voice carefully neutral, devoid of its usual playful tone. "Please, call me Chul."

I managed a curt nod, my eyes narrowed slightly, trying to reconcile this subdued version of him with the arrogant boy who had orchestrated that cruel bet. My mother, oblivious to the silent tension crackling between us, beamed. "See? Such a polite young man. I'm so glad we found him."

And so, "Park Chul" began his work. He was diligent, efficient, always ready to lend a hand. He polished furniture until it gleamed, meticulously swept the fallen pine needles from the porch, and even helped my mother decorate the Christmas tree, hanging ornaments with a surprising gentleness.

But amidst his chores, he would find moments to try and speak to me. A hushed "Gyeong-hu?" as we passed in the hallway. A lingering gaze when he thought I wasn't looking. A carefully worded question about the Christmas decorations, his voice soft and hesitant.

Each attempt was met with my cold indifference. "Yes, Chul?" I would reply, my tone clipped, the unfamiliar name a deliberate barrier.

"The… the star on the tree… it's very beautiful," he said one afternoon, as I walked past him in the living room.

"It's just an ornament," I replied, not breaking my stride.

Another time, he caught me in the garden, where I was listlessly pruning some winter-bare bushes. "Gyeong-hu, the roses… they looked lovely in the summer."

I snipped a thorny branch with unnecessary force. "They're dead now."

His persistence was infuriating, yet a small, unwilling part of me couldn't completely ignore the subtle changes in him. The cockiness was gone, replaced by a quiet humility. The playful spark in his eyes was now often shadowed by a genuine sadness.

One evening, he was carrying a heavy box of decorations up the stairs, and I happened to be descending. He stopped, his breath catching slightly. "Gyeong-hu… can we… can we talk for a moment?"

I looked at him, the weariness in his eyes almost making me falter. Almost. "There's nothing to talk about, Chul," I said, my voice firm. I brushed past him, leaving him standing there, the heavy box a silent testament to his unwanted presence in my life.

Despite my outward rejection, I couldn't deny the small, almost imperceptible cracks forming in my carefully constructed wall of

indifference. His efforts, however misguided his initial deception, were relentless. And a tiny, stubborn part of me, the part that still remembered the warmth of his smile and the thrill of his touch, was starting to notice. But the hurt was still too raw, the betrayal too deep. For now, "Park Chul" remained an unwelcome stranger in my home, his attempts at redemption met with the icy silence of a wounded heart.

So-mi's arrival was met with a comical mixture of shock and disbelief as she spotted Ji-yoo, diligently dusting a bookshelf. Her jaw practically hit the floor. "Gyeong-hu! What in the actual… is *he* doing here?"

I sighed, explaining the "Park Chul" charade. "He's helping out for the holidays. Apparently."

So-mi's eyes widened. "Gyeong-hu, truly, this is a whole new side of Ji-yoo! From childhood, that boy wouldn't even get himself a glass of water! And here he is, working like… like a servant!"

A bitter laugh escaped my lips. "This is probably just some elaborate new bet of his." But even as I said it, a sliver of doubt wormed its way in. His dedication seemed… genuine, almost desperate.

Yet, amidst this bizarre situation, something good had blossomed. My relationship with my mother had undergone a profound shift. We were spending quality time together, laughing, sharing stories. She genuinely seemed to care about my well-being, not just my academic achievements. She had even encouraged me to pursue my singing, a dream I had almost buried. But the joy was still muted, every note carrying a painful echo of Ji-yoo.

Christmas Eve arrived, a night usually filled with warmth and cheer, but my heart felt heavy and conflicted. I was in my room, staring out at the softly falling snow, when the door creaked open.

"Gyeong-hu," Ji-yoo's voice was a low whisper.

I stood up, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs. "What, Chul?"

He winced, his eyes pleading. "Call me Ji-yoo, please. When you call me Chul… it hurts. So much, princess. Please, just one chance. I know I don't deserve it, but please…"

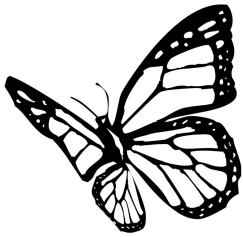
I turned away, the familiar ache of betrayal resurfacing. "I hate you."

He walked towards me, his hand gently cupping my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. "Say it while looking in my eyes."

Tears welled up, a confusing mix of anger and lingering affection. "I hate you… because I love you, Ji-yoo. Leave me alone," I choked out, pulling away from his touch.

A small, determined smile touched his lips. "I will make you mine once more, Gyeong-hu. And this time… no one's going to leave." He turned to go, pausing at the door for one last look, his eyes filled with a fierce promise. "Merry Christmas, princess." And then he was gone, leaving me standing there, my heart a battlefield of conflicting emotions, the weight of his words hanging heavy in the silent room.

Chapter 56: Lee Gyeong Hu



The New Year's Eve party was in full swing, the house buzzing with music and laughter. Hye-jin and So-mi had arrived earlier, as I had requested, and Hye-jin's initial shock at seeing Ji-yoo, still in his "Park Chul" guise, quickly morphed into a wide-eyed understanding as So-mi and I filled her in on the chaotic events of the past few weeks.

"All of *this* happened, and you didn't tell me?" Hye-jin exclaimed, her voice a mix of disbelief and hurt. "I'm your friend, Gyeong-hu! And you, So-mi, you hid this from me too?"

"What was there to tell, Hye-jin?" I said, my voice weary. "It ended before it even started. Or rather, it was a lie from the beginning."

She looked at me, her expression serious. "You want to end everything? Just like that?" I nodded, a flicker of hesitation still present within me. She grabbed my hand, and then So-mi's. "Come with me, quietly."

She led us downstairs, navigating through the throng of party guests. Her eyes scanned the room until she spotted Ji-yoo, who was unobtrusively clearing empty glasses, Joon-ho and

Dong-hyun nearby engaged in a boisterous conversation. Hye-jin stopped directly in front of Ji-yoo, releasing my hand.

"You want to end it, huh, Gyeong-hu?" Hye-jin said, her voice surprisingly firm, her gaze fixed on me. Ji-yoo looked up, his eyes meeting mine, a flicker of apprehension in their depths. I looked back at him, the question in Hye-jin's voice echoing the turmoil within me. Did I truly want to end it? I nodded slowly, the hesitation still a knot in my stomach.

Hye-jin looked at me, a knowing glint in her eyes. "So end it today. Forgive him. End this whole damn drama."

My eyes widened in surprise, and I saw a similar shock register on Ji-yoo's face. Then, a slow, hopeful smile spread across his features, as if Hye-jin had uttered the most beautiful words in the world. Hye-jin smiled too, a small, encouraging curve of her lips. So-mi, ever the peacemaker, also offered a hopeful smile.

"But…" I began, the protest forming on my lips.

Hye-jin cut me off, her voice gentle but resolute. "What 'but,' Gyeong-hu? Ji-yoo is the king of his own life. And here, in your house, he's being a servant. Not because he's just regretting what he did, or because he's ashamed – though I'm sure he is. He's doing this because he loves you so much, Gyeong-hu. Enough to swallow his pride, to endure your coldness, to work his fingers to the bone just to be near you, hoping for a sliver of your forgiveness. Isn't that worth… something?" She looked at me, her eyes pleading for me to see beyond the hurt, to recognize the depth of his current actions. The noise of the party faded for me and Ji-yoo.

Miraculously, amidst the swirling energy of the New Year's Eve party, with music pulsating and conversations overlapping, our

small, intense drama went largely unnoticed. The other guests were too caught up in their own celebrations to pay much heed to a hushed exchange near the edge of the living room.

Ji-yoo, his eyes fixed on mine, took a deep breath, the noise of the party fading into a distant hum. "Gyeong-hu," he began, his voice low and sincere, each word carefully chosen, "Hye-jin is right. I was the king of my own life, making foolish choices, blinded by a stupid bet. But the moment you looked at me, truly looked at me, everything changed. The world suddenly had color, music, a reason to beat." He stepped a little closer, his gaze unwavering.

"The bet… it was the most idiotic, selfish thing I've ever done. And the pain I caused you… it haunts me every single moment. Seeing you hurt, knowing I was the reason… it's a weight I can barely carry. Being here, as 'Chul'… it wasn't a game, Gyeong-hu. It was the only way I could be near you, to show you, in small, clumsy ways, how desperately sorry I am." His voice cracked with emotion.

"Every discarded gift, every cold word you threw my way… I deserved it. More. But seeing you laugh with So-mi and Hye-jin, even that small glimpse of your happiness… it gave me a tiny sliver of hope. Hope that maybe, someday, you could forgive me. Not for what I did, but for the man I want to be for you." Tears welled in his eyes, mirroring the emotions churning within me.

"You said my love was a lie, a cruel joke. And in the beginning… it was. But somewhere along the way, Gyeong-hu, that lie became the only truth I know. You are the most precious thing in my life. Losing you… it would be like losing the very air I breathe." His voice was thick with unshed tears. "Please, Gyeong-hu. Just give me another chance. Let me earn back your

trust. Let me show you that the 'king' I once was is dead, and in his place is a fool, utterly and completely in love with you."

His words, raw and heartfelt, pierced through the layers of my anger and hurt. Tears welled in my own eyes, blurring his image. The sincerity in his voice, the genuine pain in his expression… it was undeniable. The dam I had so carefully constructed finally broke.

With a choked sob, I stepped forward and into his arms. He held me tight, his embrace filled with a desperate relief. I buried my face in his chest, the familiar scent of him, which had been a source of pain, now felt like a fragile comfort.

We stood there for a long moment, the unspoken words hanging in the air, the emotions swirling around us. Then, slowly, tentatively, he tilted my chin up, his eyes searching mine. And then, we kissed. It wasn't a tentative, chaste kiss. It was a deep, passionate outpouring of regret, longing, and a fragile hope for a future we had almost lost. The world around us seemed to fade away, the music and laughter of the party dissolving into a soft hum.

When we finally broke apart, breathless, I could feel the weight of every eye in the room on us. So-mi and Hye-jin were beaming, tears of relief and happiness shining in their eyes. Joon-ho clapped softly, a wide grin on his face. Even my mother, who had turned to see what the commotion was about, watched with a surprised but ultimately softened expression. In that moment, surrounded by the quiet joy of our friends and family, it felt like maybe, just maybe, the broken pieces of my heart could begin to mend.

Joon-ho, ever the dramatic one, turned to So-mi with a hopeful expression. "Did my goddess finally deign to forgive this humble servant?"

So-mi playfully tilted her head, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Hmm… Not yet, Drama King. You still have penance to do."

He clutched his chest dramatically. "Ahhh… the pain! It pierces my very soul!"

She chuckled, relenting. "Okay, okay. I forgive you, you big baby."

I looked at Ji-yoo, a soft smile gracing my lips. He returned it, his eyes filled with a love that felt both familiar and newly reborn. "I never said this before," he murmured, his voice husky with emotion, "but today feels like the right time, I guess." He looked deep into my eyes. "I love you, my Queen. I love you so much."

And so, that chaotic New Year's Eve marked not an end, but a new beginning. Our story, indeed, had been a rollercoaster of emotions, a tapestry woven with threads of hope, sadness, happiness, and the dark shadow of betrayal. But ultimately, it was a story of second chances and the enduring power of love.

Years passed. Life, as it always does, took its own winding path. I poured my heart and soul into my music, my voice resonating with the experiences I had lived, and I eventually found fame as a singer in Korea. My Ji-yoo, steady and devoted, took over his grandfather's business, his sharp mind and kind heart guiding it to new heights. So-mi's artistic flair blossomed, and she became a sought-after makeup artist, her talent gracing magazine covers and celebrity faces. Hye-jin, ever the adventurous spirit, ventured abroad for her studies, her sharp intellect shining in a new academic environment. Dong-hyun, loyal as ever, followed

his sister Hye-jin overseas, pursuing his own educational dreams. And our dear Joon-ho, with his protective instincts and natural leadership, rose to become the CEO of a successful security company.

One quiet morning, the familiar ring of my landline broke the peaceful silence. It was Hye-jin, her voice laced with a tremor of worry. "Gyeong-hu… I've made a mistake."

My heart skipped a beat. "What happened, Hye-jin?" I asked, my voice filled with concern.

There was a long pause on the other end. Then, she confessed, her voice barely a whisper, "I… I had a one-night stand."

My eyes widened in surprise. "With whom, Hye-jin?" I asked, my mind racing with possibilities.

***

The End

But destiny's script held unwritten acts, where unveiled secrets would seize her breath and pull her, unknowingly, into a new, unforeseen chapter." Love With Fate" in which Divine will write about the forbidden love of Hye-jin and Enzo coming soon.

This was my best effort and I will keep doing my next work better than before. If you wanna keep in touch with me make sure to follow me on instagram and contact me by email.
Instagram: @stories_by_dk_7
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Thank you so much for taking the time to read Love With Curse. If you enjoyed this book, I would be immensely grateful if you could leave a review on the platform(s) of your choice.

Lot Of Love By DK.

Love Series

Separate stories, shared threads.

Love With Curse

Love With Fate

Love With Destiny

Love With Lies

About the Author

Meet Dua Khan, or DK if you're cool (and let's be real, you are). She's the literary architect behind your next steamy book boyfriend (sorry, real guys). Expect diverse casts, feelings that punch you in the gut, and enough witty banter and spice to make your e-reader blush. When DK isn't conjuring up fictional flames, she's probably lost in an airport, single-handedly keeping the retail industry afloat, befriending every ice cream vendor, belting out tunes (possibly off-key, who's judging?), and maintaining a strictly fictional dating life. Because, let's face it, fictional men *always* text back.